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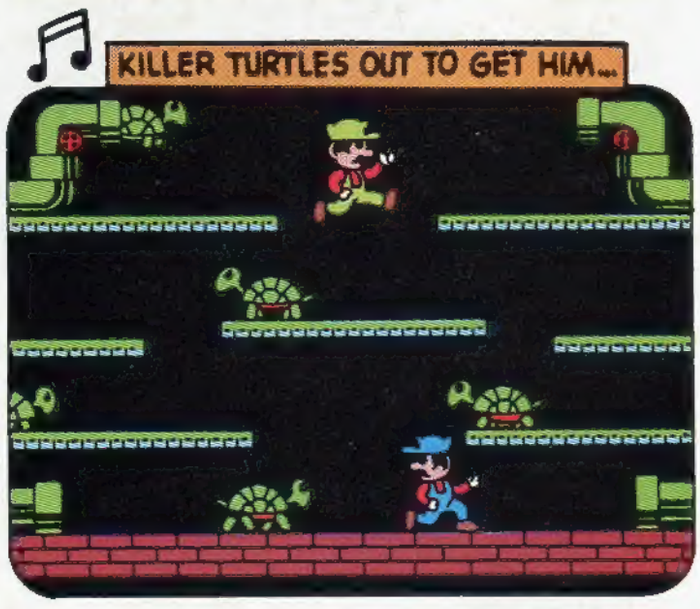

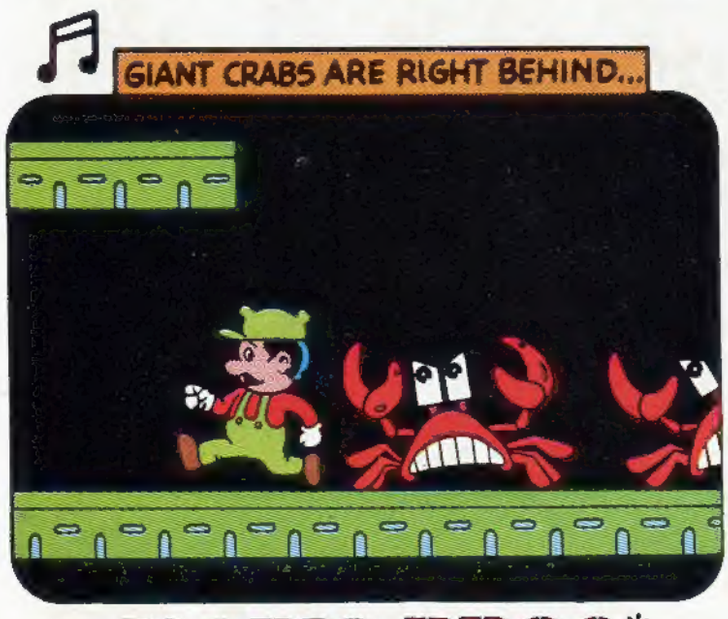

MARIO BROS.*

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STAN LEE PRESENTS: THE GREATEST OF THE SPACEKNIGHTS--ROM!

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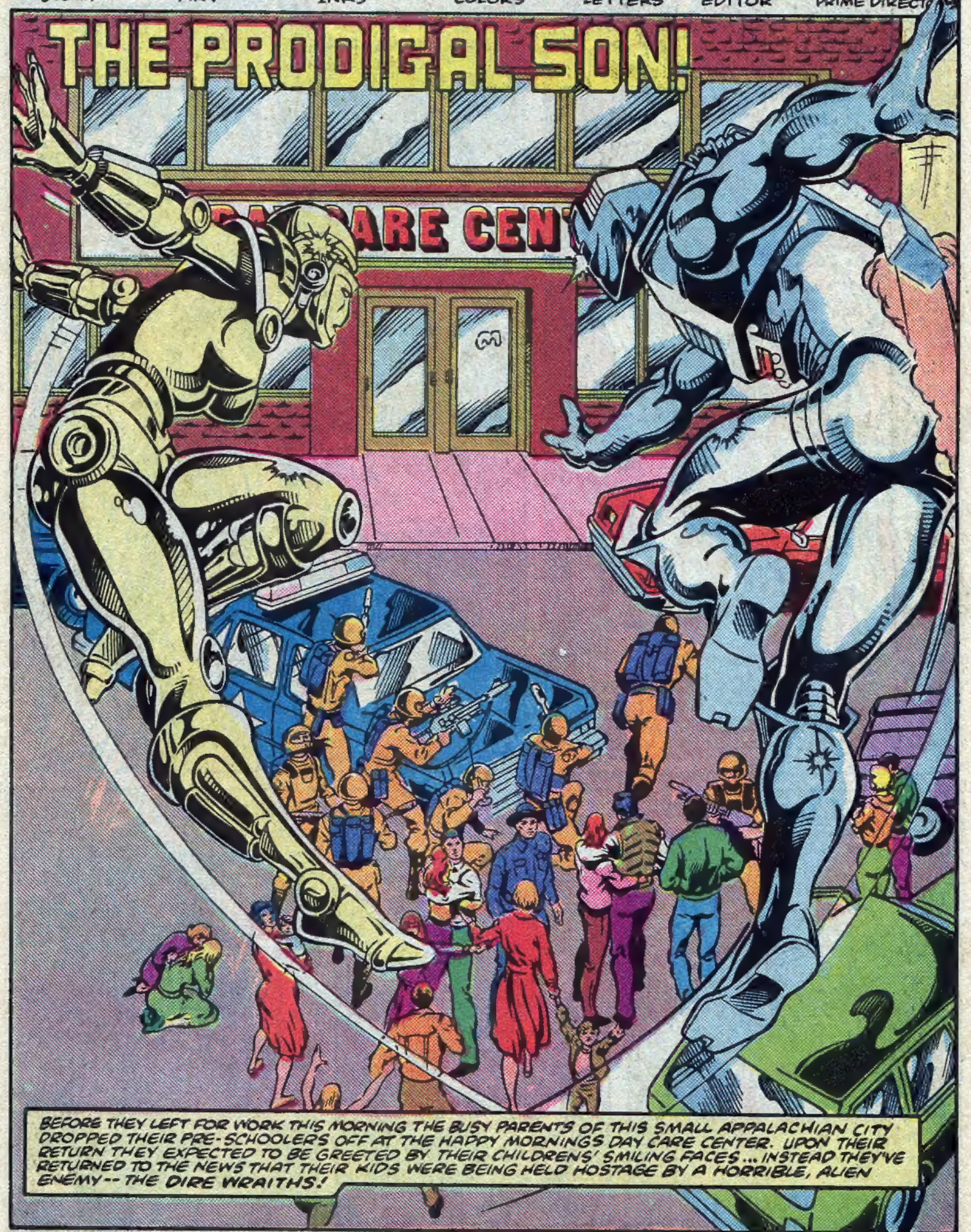

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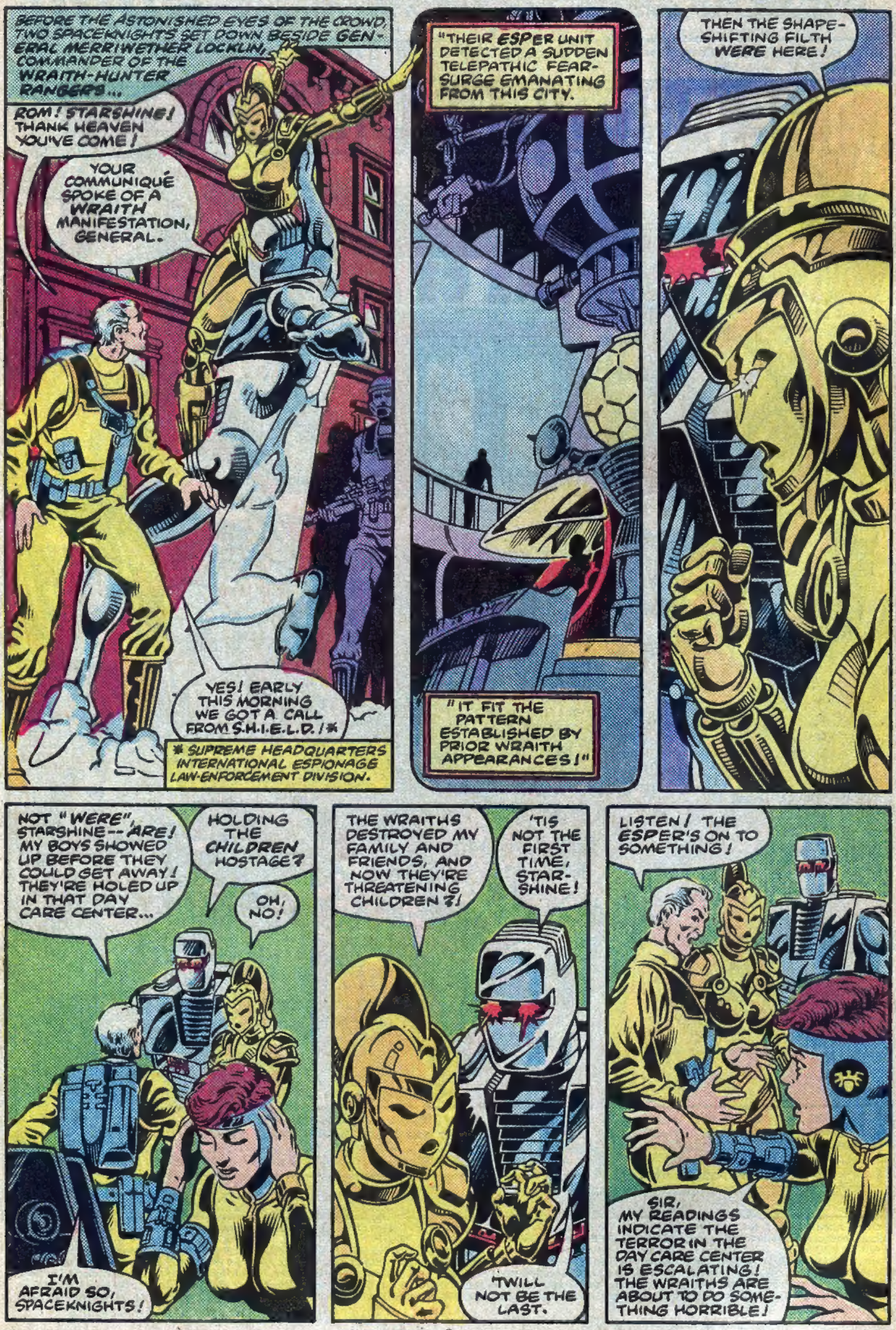
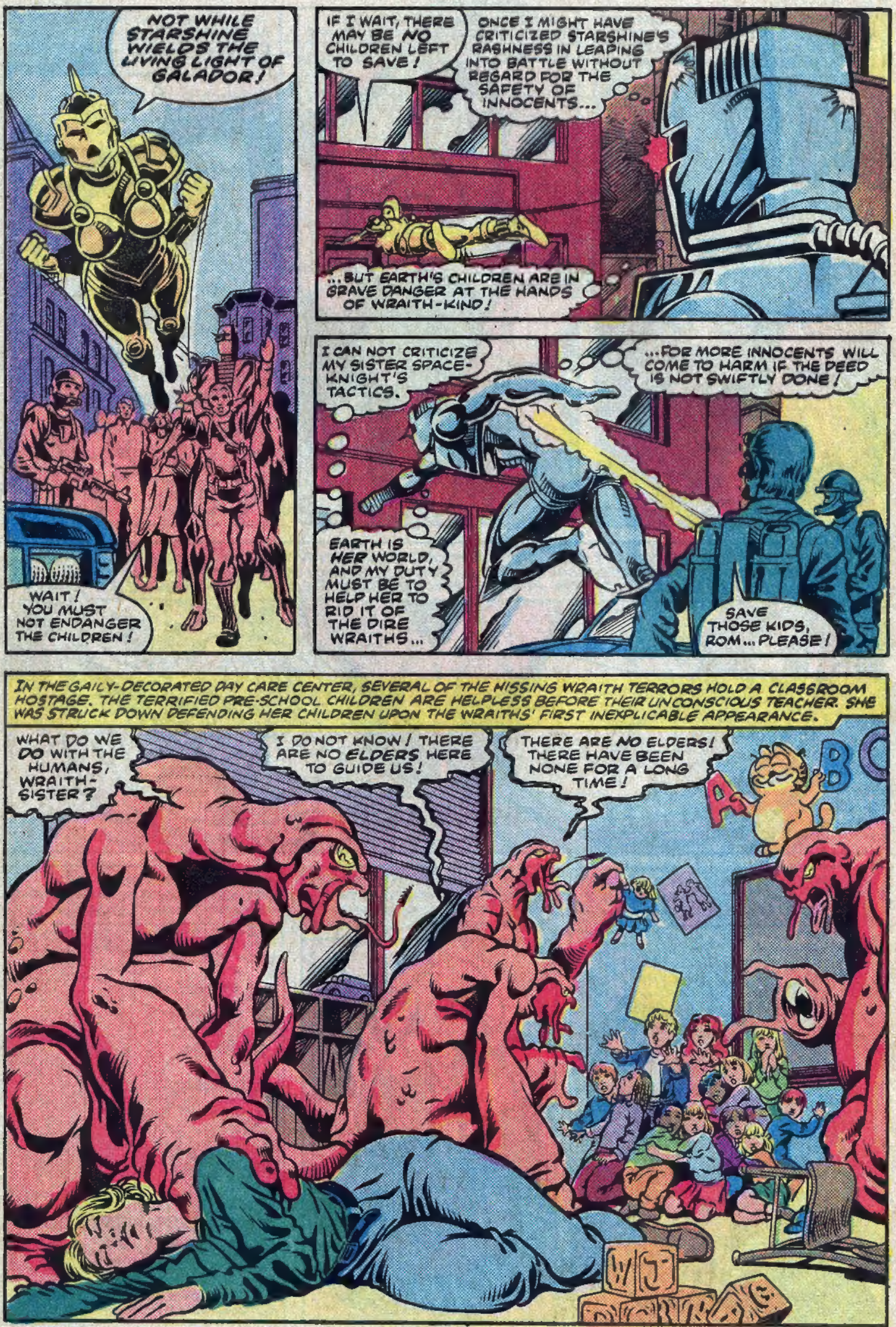
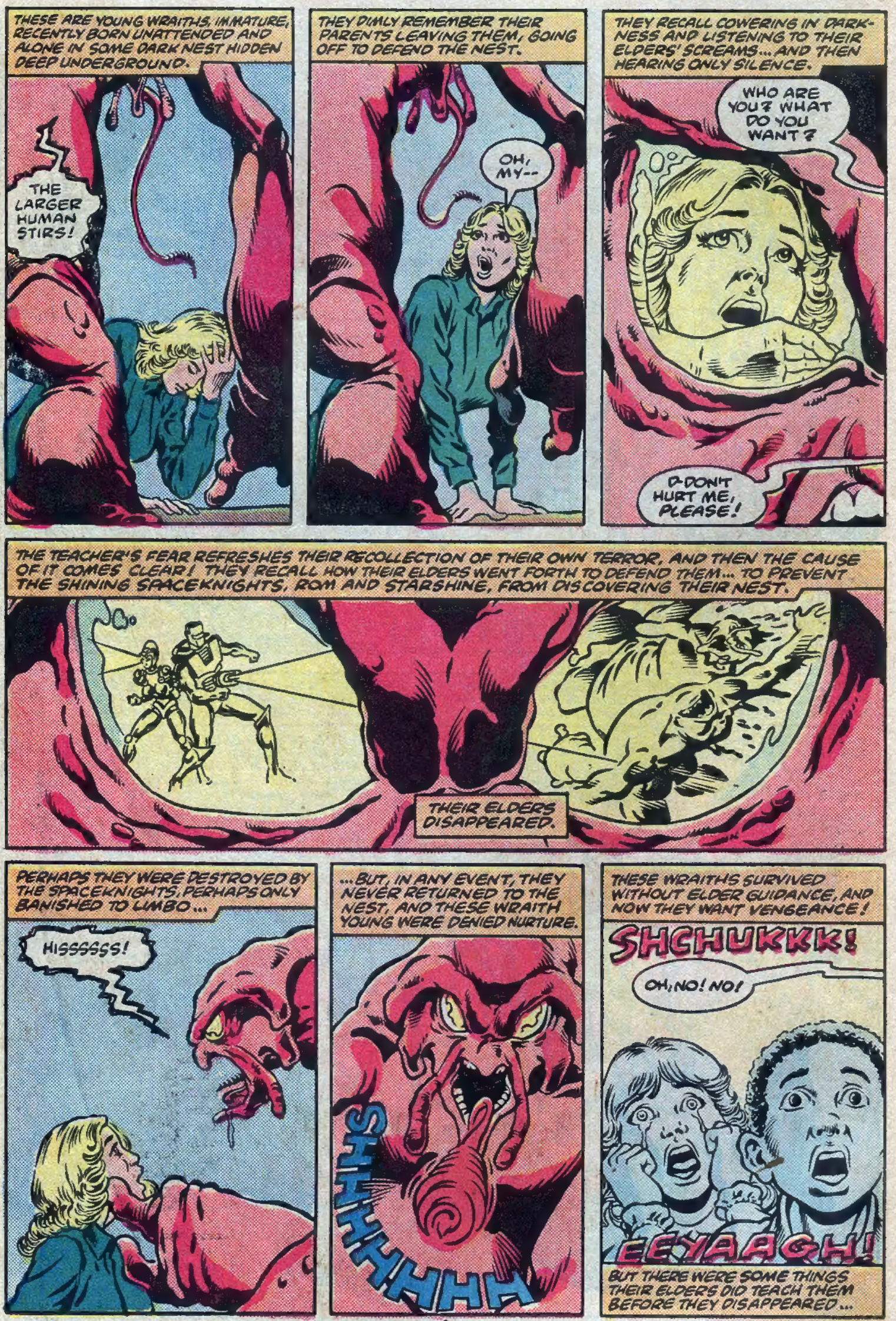

BEFORE THE ASTONISHED EYES OF THE CROWD, TWO SPACEKNIGHTS SET DOWN BESIDE GENERAL MERRIWETHER LOCKLIN, COMMANDER OF THE WRAITH-HUNTER RANGERS...
ROM! STARSHINE! THANK HEAVEN YOU'VE COME!
YOUR COMMUNIQUÉ SPOKE OF A WRAITH MANIFESTATION, GENERAL.
YES! EARLY THIS MORNING WE GOT A CALL FROM S.H.I.E.L.D.!*
* SUPREME HEADQUARTERS INTERNATIONAL ESPIONAGE LAW-ENFORCEMENT DIVISION.
"THEIR ESPER UNIT DETECTED A SUDDEN TELEPATHIC FEAR-SURGE EMANATING FROM THIS CITY.
"IT FIT THE PATTERN ESTABLISHED BY PRIOR WRAITH APPEARANCES!"
THEN THE SHAPE-SHIFTING FILTH WERE HERE!
NOT "WERE", STARSHINE--ARE! MY BOYS SHOWED UP BEFORE THEY COULD GET AWAY! THEY'RE HOLED UP IN THAT DAY CARE CENTER...
HOLDING THE CHILDREN HOSTAGE?
OH, NO!
I'M AFRAID SO, SPACEKNIGHTS!
THE WRAITHS DESTROYED MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS, AND NOW THEY'RE THREATENING CHILDREN?!
'TIS NOT THE FIRST TIME, STARSHINE!
'TWILL NOT BE THE LAST.
LISTEN! THE ESPER'S ON TO SOMETHING!
SIR, MY READINGS INDICATE THE TERROR IN THE DAY CARE CENTER IS ESCALATING! THE WRAITHS ARE ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING HORRIBLE!


NOT WHILE STARSHINE WIELDS THE LIVING LIGHT OF GALADOR!
WAIT! YOU MUST NOT ENDANGER THE CHILDREN!
IF I WAIT, THERE MAY BE NO CHILDREN LEFT TO SAVE!
ONCE I MIGHT HAVE CRITICIZED STARSHINE'S RASHNESS IN LEAPING INTO BATTLE WITHOUT REGARD FOR THE SAFETY OF INNOCENTS...
...BUT EARTH'S CHILDREN ARE IN GRAVE DANGER AT THE HANDS OF WRAITH-KIND!
I CAN NOT CRITICIZE MY SISTER SPACE-KNIGHT'S TACTICS.
...FOR MORE INNOCENTS WILL COME TO HARM IF THE DEED IS NOT SWIFTLY DONE!
EARTH IS HER WORLD, AND MY DUTY MUST BE TO HELP HER TO RID IT OF THE DIRE WRAITHS...
SAVE THOSE KIDS, ROM... PLEASE!
IN THE GAILY-DECORATED DAY CARE CENTER, SEVERAL OF THE HISSING WRAITH TERRORS HOLD A CLASSROOM HOSTAGE. THE TERRIFIED PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN ARE HELPLESS BEFORE THEIR UNCONSCIOUS TEACHER. SHE WAS STRUCK DOWN DEFENDING HER CHILDREN UPON THE WRAITHS' FIRST INEXPLICABLE APPEARANCE.
WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE HUMANS, WRAITH-SISTER?
I DO NOT KNOW! THERE ARE NO ELDERS HERE TO GUIDE US!
THERE ARE NO ELDERS! THERE HAVE BEEN NONE FOR A LONG TIME!
A B C


THESE ARE YOUNG WRAITHS, IMMATURE, RECENTLY BORN UNATTENDED AND ALONE IN SOME DARK NEST HIDDEN DEEP UNDERGROUND.
THE LARGER HUMAN STIRS!
THEY DIMLY REMEMBER THEIR PARENTS LEAVING THEM, GOING OFF TO DEFEND THE NEST.
OH, MY--
THEY RECALL COWERING IN DARKNESS AND LISTENING TO THEIR ELDERS' SCREAMS... AND THEN HEARING ONLY SILENCE.
WHO ARE YOU? WHAT DO YOU WANT?
D-DON'T HURT ME, PLEASE!
THE TEACHER'S FEAR REFRESHES THEIR RECOLLECTION OF THEIR OWN TERROR, AND THEN THE CAUSE OF IT COMES CLEAR! THEY RECALL HOW THEIR ELDERS WENT FORTH TO DEFEND THEM... TO PREVENT THE SHINING SPACEKNIGHTS, ROM AND STARSHINE, FROM DISCOVERING THEIR NEST.
THEIR ELDERS DISAPPEARED.
PERHAPS THEY WERE DESTROYED BY THE SPACEKNIGHTS, PERHAPS ONLY BANISHED TO LIMBO...
HISSSSSS!
...BUT, IN ANY EVENT, THEY NEVER RETURNED TO THE NEST, AND THESE WRAITH YOUNG WERE DENIED NURTURE.
SHHHHHHA
THESE WRAITHS SURVIVED WITHOUT ELDER GUIDANCE, AND NOW THEY WANT VENGEANCE!
SHCHUKKK!
OH, NO! NO!
EEYAAGH!
BUT THERE WERE SOME THINGS THEIR ELDERS DID TEACH THEM BEFORE THEY DISAPPEARED...

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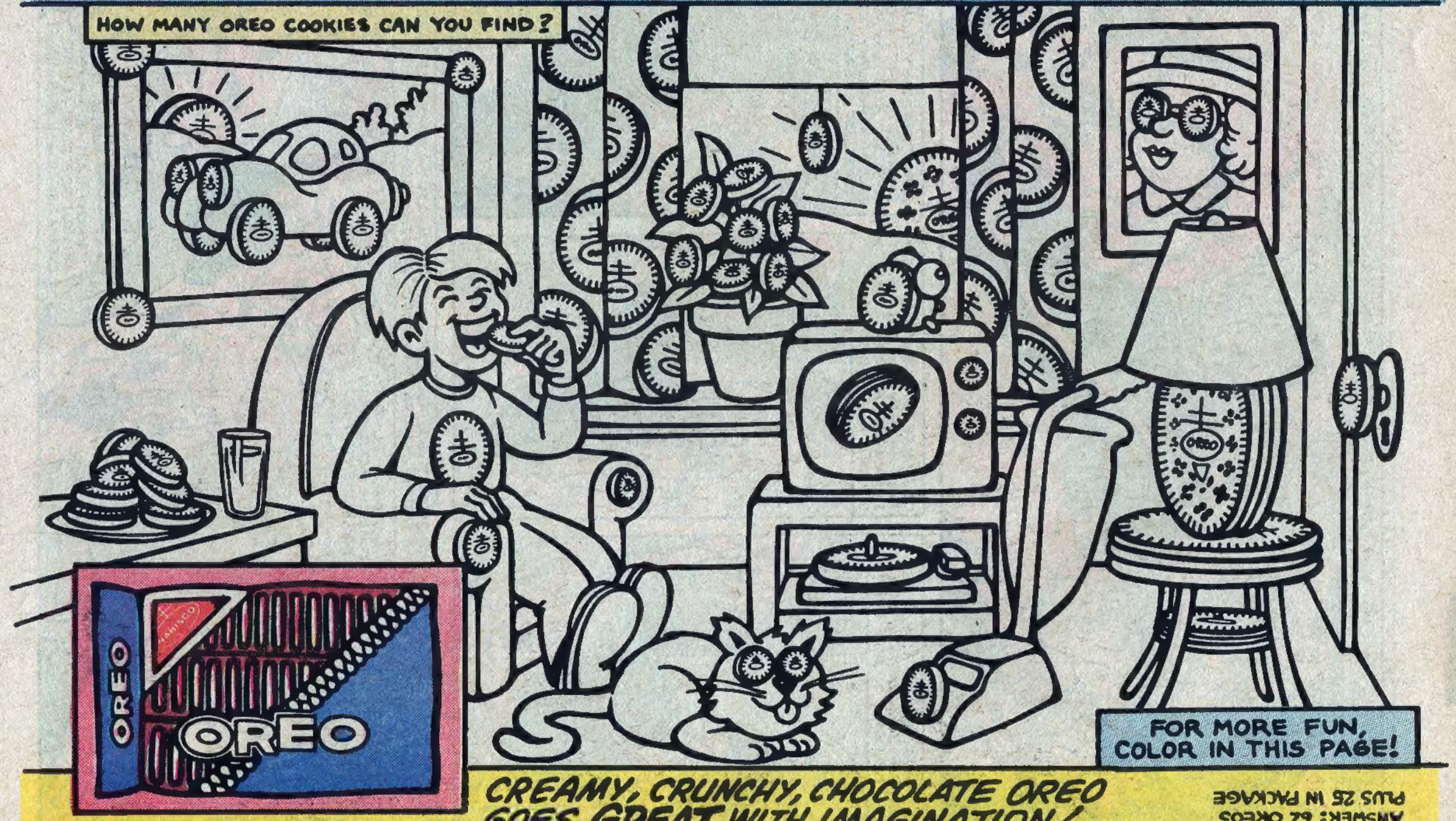

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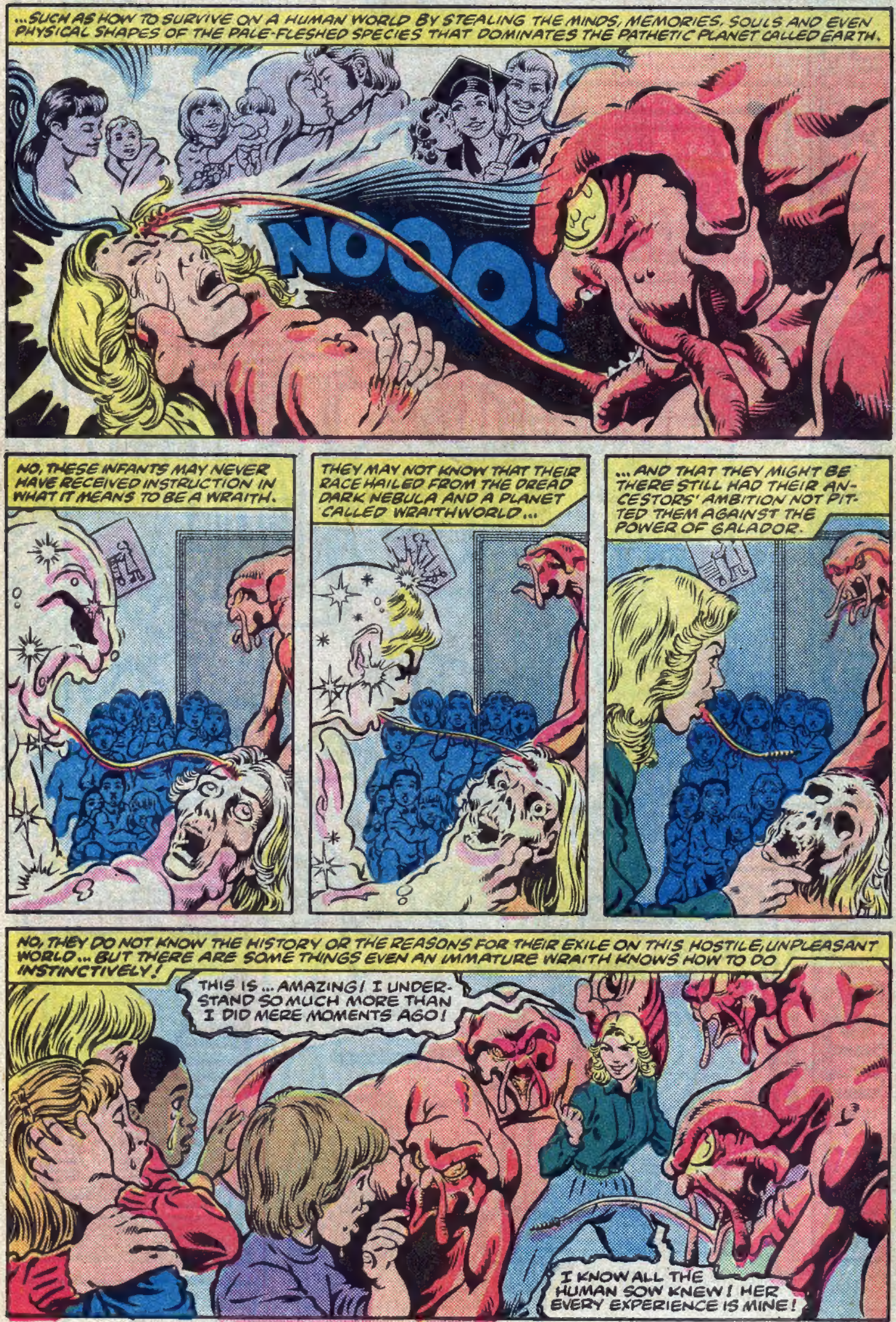
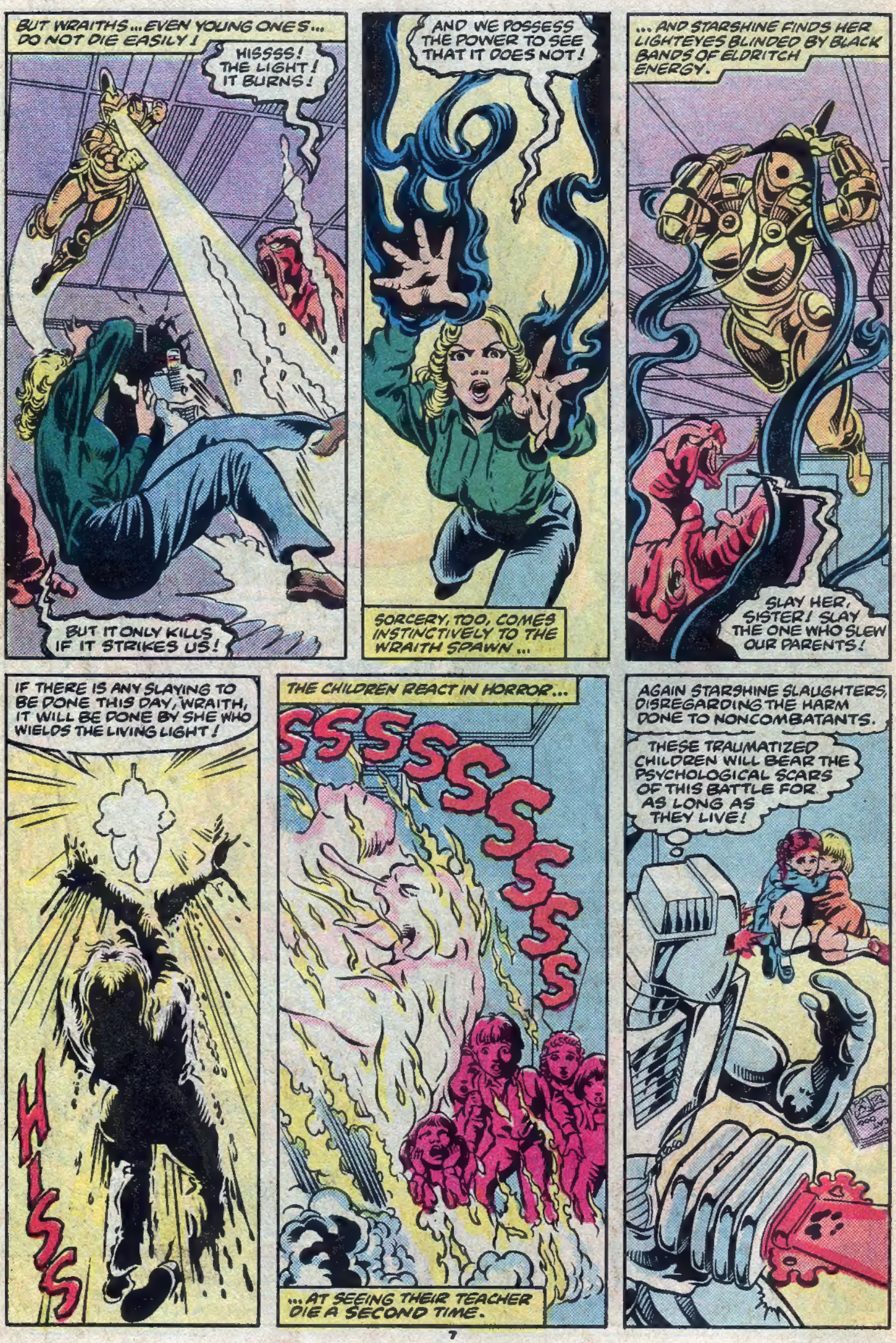
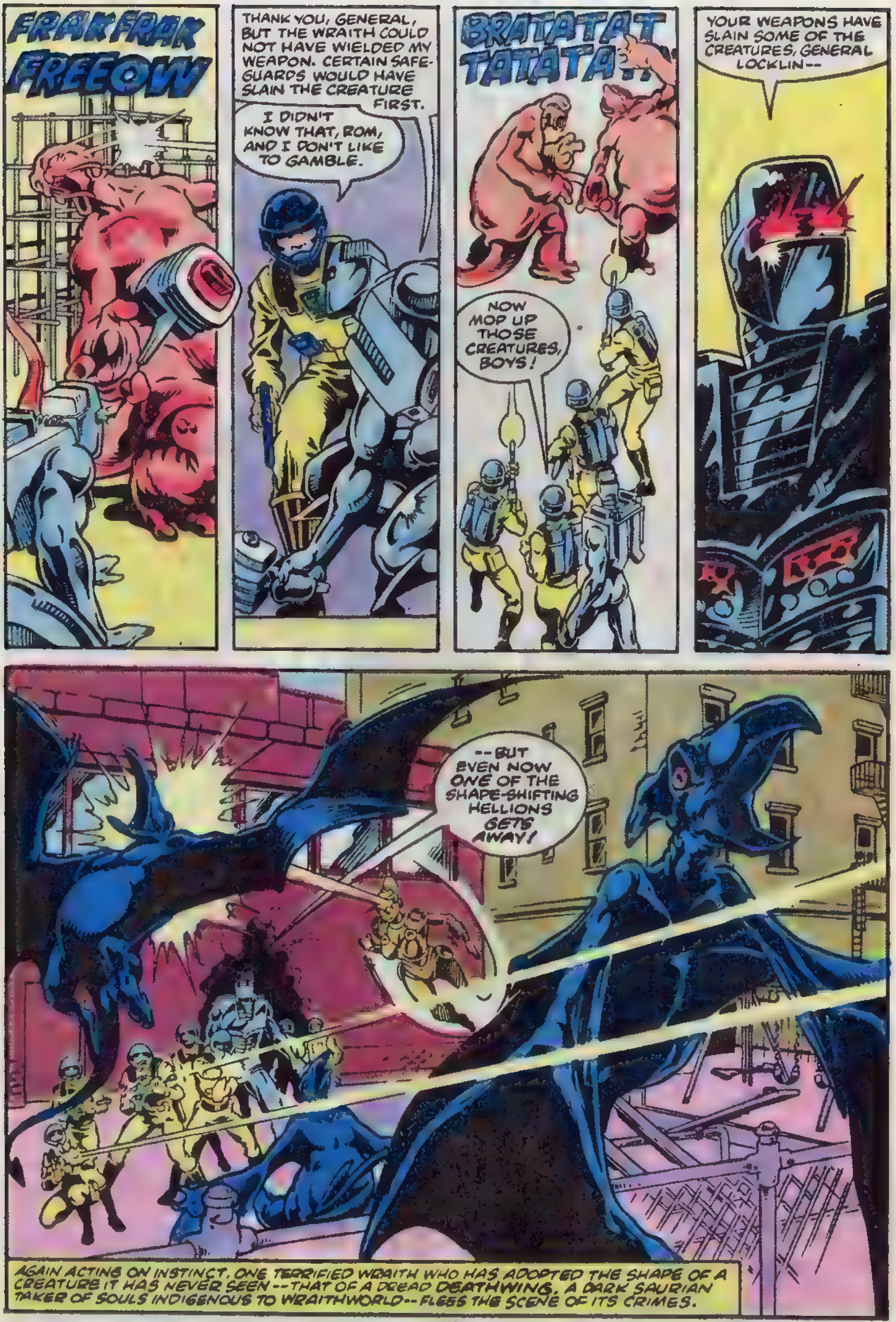

...SUCH AS HOW TO SURVIVE ON A HUMAN WORLD BY STEALING THE MINDS, MEMORIES, SOULS AND EVEN PHYSICAL SHAPES OF THE PALE-FLESHED SPECIES THAT DOMINATES THE PATHETIC PLANET CALLED EARTH.
NOOO!
NO, THESE INFANTS MAY NEVER HAVE RECEIVED INSTRUCTION IN WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A WRAITH.
THEY MAY NOT KNOW THAT THEIR RACE HAILED FROM THE DREAD DARK NEBULA AND A PLANET CALLED WRAITHWORLD...
...AND THAT THEY MIGHT BE THERE STILL HAD THEIR ANCESTORS' AMBITION NOT PITTED THEM AGAINST THE POWER OF GALADOR.
NO, THEY DO NOT KNOW THE HISTORY OR THE REASONS FOR THEIR EXILE ON THIS HOSTILE, UNPLEASANT WORLD... BUT THERE ARE SOME THINGS EVEN AN IMMATURE WRAITH KNOWS HOW TO DO INSTINCTIVELY!
THIS IS ... AMAZING! I UNDERSTAND SO MUCH MORE THAN I DID MERE MOMENTS AGO!
I KNOW ALL THE HUMAN SOW KNEW! HER EVERY EXPERIENCE IS MINE!

I UNDERSTAND WHY OUR ELDERS HATED AND FEARED HUMANITY, AND WHY HUMANITY HATES AND FEARS US WRAITHS! WE ARE RACES APART, IRRECONCILABLE! YET HUMANITY CAN SERVE WRAITHKIND!
NO NEED TO BE AFRAID, CHILDREN! WE'RE ONLY GOING TO PLAY A LITTLE GAME NOW!
A GAME CALLED... "TRICK OR TREAT!"
YOU ARE GOING TO BE "TREATED" TO THE RARE PRIVILEGE OF BECOMING DIRE WRAITHS--AND THEN WE ARE GOING TO "TRICK" YOUR UNSUSPECTING PARENTS INTO TAKING US INTO THEIR HOMES!
THE HUMAN CHILDREN ARE MESMERIZED AS RAZOR-BARBED TONGUES SNAKE OUT TO CARESS THEIR FRIGHTENED FACES.
NOW, SISTERS, LET US DO AS OUR DESTINY BIDS.
YOUR DESTINY ORDAINS THAT THIS DAY YOU DIE, WRAITH-SCUM!
SHTOOM!
THE YOUNG WRAITHS RECALL THEIR ELDERS' DISAPPEARANCE, AND THEY CRY OUT TO THINK THAT THEY, TOO, SHALL LOSE LIFE BEFORE THEY HAVE FULLY BEGUN TO LIVE!!


BUT WRAITHS... EVEN YOUNG ONES... DO NOT DIE EASILY!
HISSSS! THE LIGHT! IT BURNS!
BUT IT ONLY KILLS IF IT STRIKES US!
AND WE POSSESS THE POWER TO SEE THAT IT DOES NOT!
SORCERY, TOO, COMES INSTINCTIVELY TO THE WRAITH SPAWN...
...AND STARSHINE FINDS HER LIGHTEYES BLINDED BY BLACK BANDS OF ELDRITCH ENERGY.
SLAY HER, SISTER! SLAY THE ONE WHO SLEW OUR PARENTS!
IF THERE IS ANY SLAYING TO BE DONE THIS DAY, WRAITH, IT WILL BE DONE BY SHE WHO WIELDS THE LIVING LIGHT!
HISS
THE CHILDREN REACT IN HORROR...
SSSSSSSSS
...AT SEEING THEIR TEACHER DIE A SECOND TIME.
AGAIN STARSHINE SLAUGHTERS, DISREGARDING THE HARM DONE TO NONCOMBATANTS.
THESE TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN WILL BEAR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SCARS OF THIS BATTLE FOR AS LONG AS THEY LIVE!

STARSHINE, FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILDREN, RESTRAIN YOUR BLOODLUST AND AID ME IN DRIVING THE WRAITHS FROM THE CLASS-ROOM.
I CARE NOT WHERE I KILL THE CRAVEN CREATURES, ROM--
--SO LONG AS THEY ARE KILLED!
SO LONG AS THEY CAN NEVER MENACE ANOTHER INHABITANT OF EARTH AGAIN!
THE SORCEROUS SHIELDS, CONJURED FORTH BY THE INFANT WRAITHS, PRESERVE THEIR LIVES...
...BUT THEY CANNOT PREVENT THEM FROM BEING DRIVEN FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE PLAYGROUND WITHOUT.

WITH THE WRAITHS CLEARED FROM THE CLASSROOM, THE WRAITH-HUNTER RANGERS SWIFTLY MOVE IN TO RESCUE THE CHILDREN.
IT'S ALL RIGHT, KIDS! YOU'RE SAFE NOW!
THEY'RE COWERING AWAY FROM US ...WHIMPERING!
AFTER WHAT THEY'VE BEEN THROUGH, IT'S GOING TO TAKE A LIFETIME BEFORE THEY CAN BEAR THE MEMORY OF THE HORRORS THEY'VE SEEN.
OH, MOMMY! MOMMY!
IF THEY EVER DO.
GENERAL, THE WRAITHS ARE STILL RESISTING!
THEIR MAGIC IS SHIELDING THEM AGAINST STARSHINE'S LIGHTEYES--
--AND, IN DEFLECTING IT TOWARDS ROM, THEY'VE CAUSED HIM TO DROP HIS NEUTRALIZER!
GENERAL LOCKLIN KNOWS THE POWER OF GALADOR'S GREATEST WEAPON...
...AND THE BLOOD FREEZES IN HIS VEINS AS HE WITNESSES ONE OF THE ALIEN DEMONS STOOP TO RETRIEVE ROM'S FALLEN WEAPON.


FRAK FRAK FREEOW
THANK YOU, GENERAL, BUT THE WRAITH COULD NOT HAVE WIELDED MY WEAPON. CERTAIN SAFE-GUARDS WOULD HAVE SLAIN THE CREATURE FIRST.
I DIDN'T KNOW THAT, ROM, AND I DON'T LIKE TO GAMBLE.
BRATATAT TATATA..
NOW MOP UP THOSE CREATURES, BOYS!
YOUR WEAPONS HAVE SLAIN SOME OF THE CREATURES, GENERAL LOCKLIN--
--BUT EVEN NOW ONE OF THE SHAPE-SHIFTING HELLIONS GETS AWAY!
AGAIN ACTING ON INSTINCT, ONE TERRIFIED WRAITH WHO HAS ADOPTED THE SHAPE OF A CREATURE IT HAS NEVER SEEN--THAT OF A DREAD DEATHWING, A DARK SAURIAN TAKER OF SOULS INDIGENOUS TO WRAITHWORLD--FLEES THE SCENE OF ITS CRIMES.

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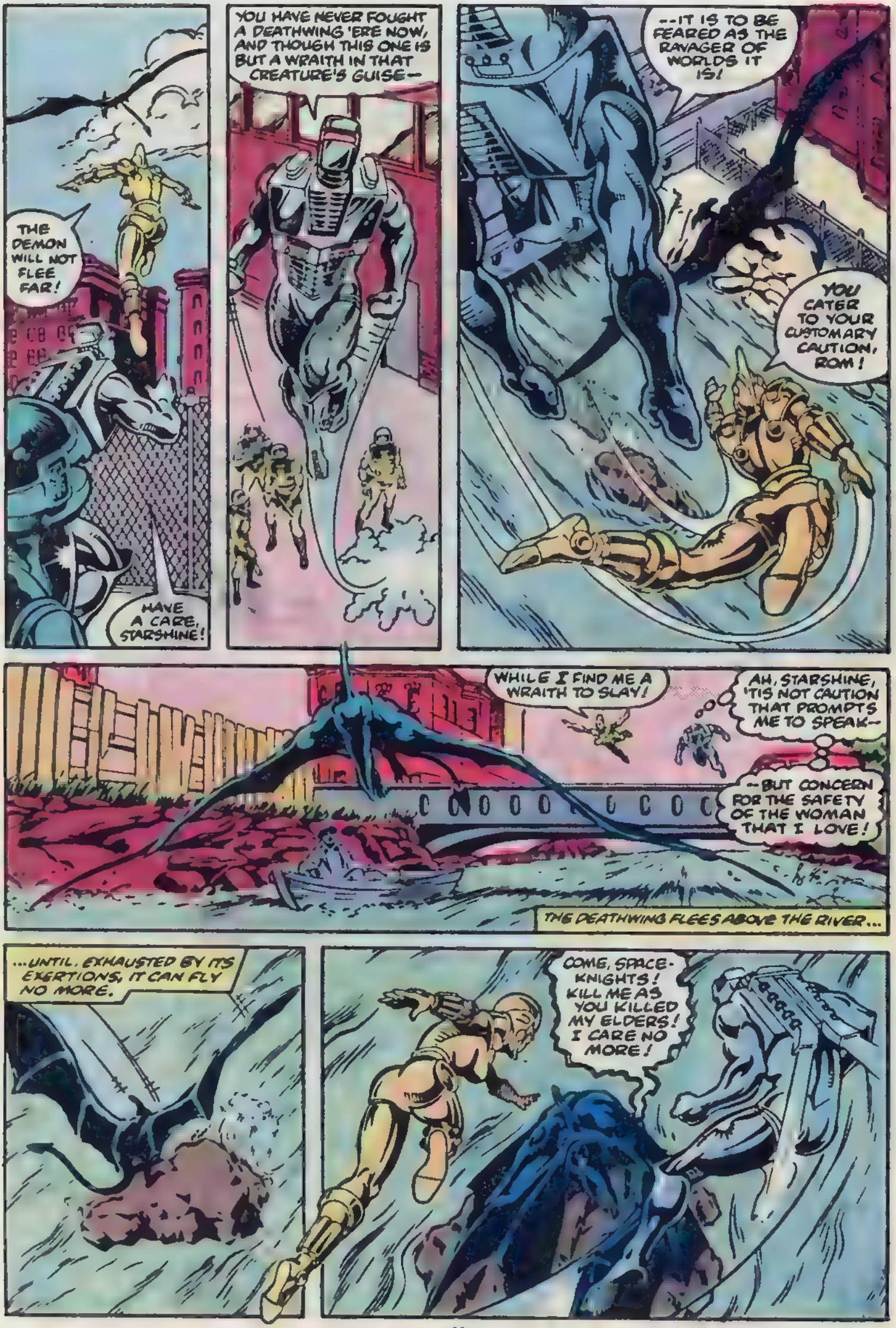
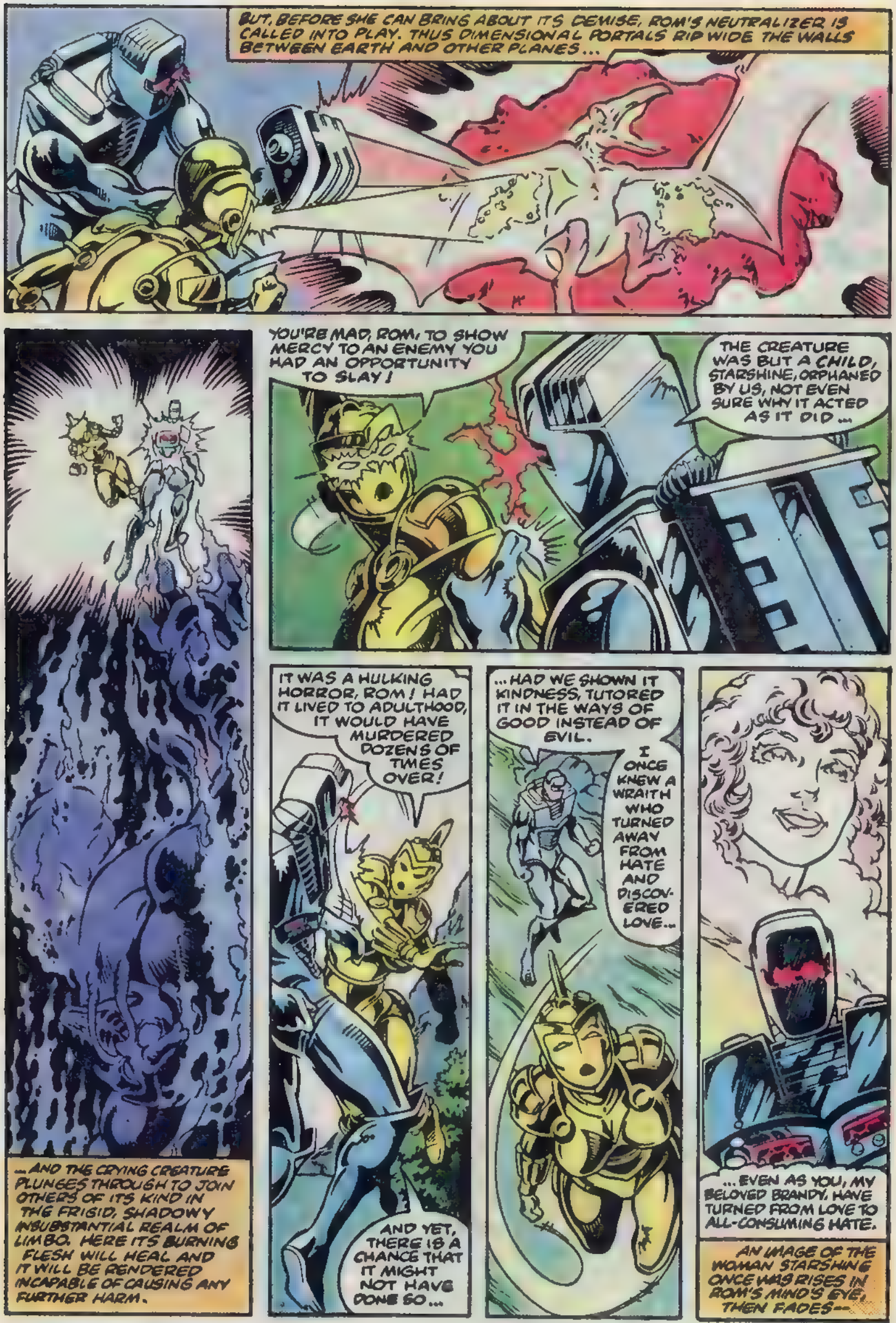
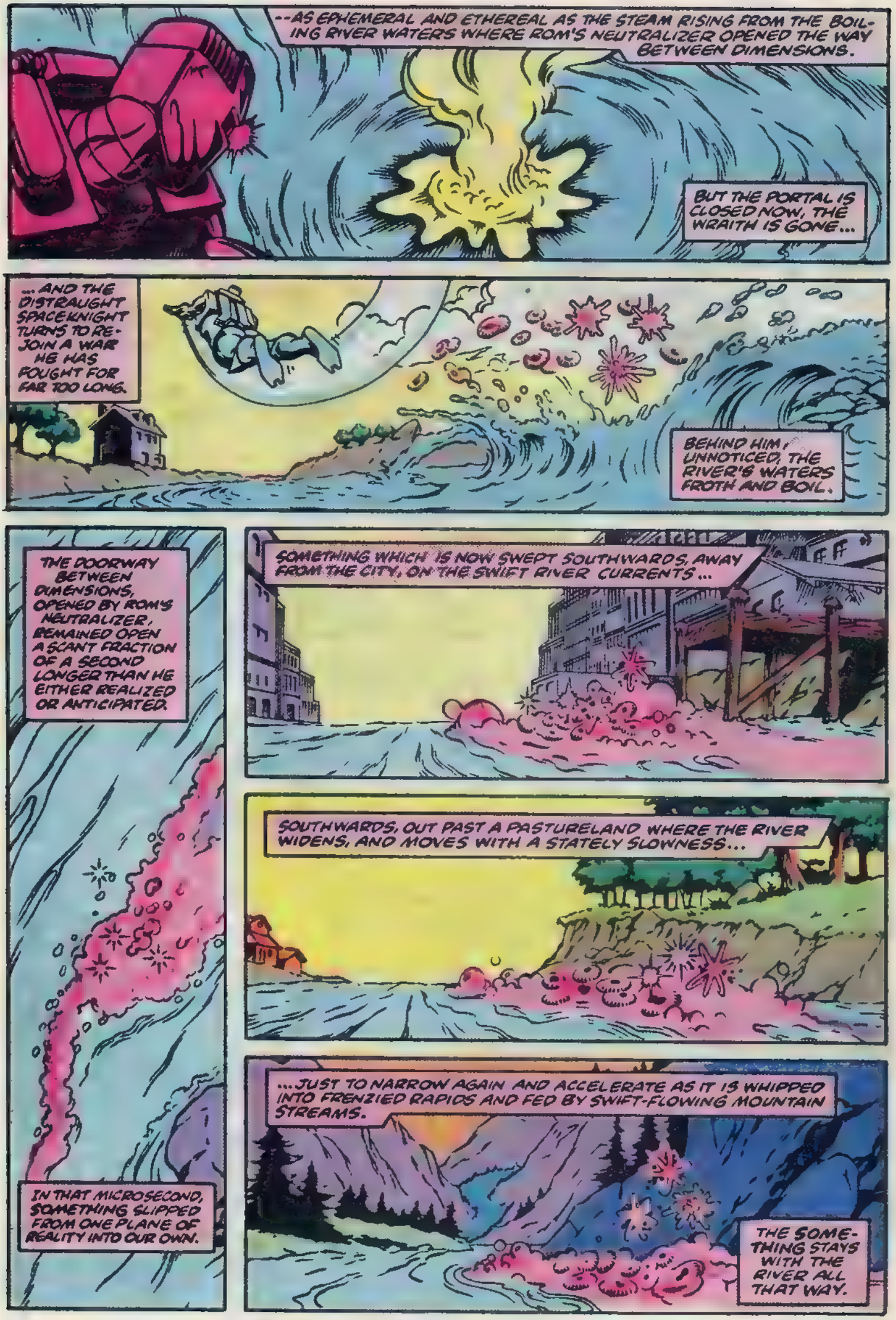

THE DEMON WILL NOT FLEE FAR!
HAVE A CARE, STARSHINE!
YOU HAVE NEVER FOUGHT A DEATHWING 'ERE NOW, AND THOUGH THIS ONE IS BUT A WRAITH IN THAT CREATURE'S GUISE--
--IT IS TO BE FEARED AS THE RAVAGER OF WORLDS IT IS!
YOU CATER TO YOUR CUSTOMARY CAUTION, ROM!
WHILE I FIND ME A WRAITH TO SLAY!
AH, STARSHINE, 'TIS NOT CAUTION THAT PROMPTS ME TO SPEAK--
--BUT CONCERN FOR THE SAFETY OF THE WOMAN THAT I LOVE!
THE DEATHWING FLEES ABOVE THE RIVER...
...UNTIL, EXHAUSTED BY ITS EXERTIONS, IT CAN FLY NO MORE.
COME, SPACE-KNIGHTS! KILL ME AS YOU KILLED MY ELDERS! I CARE NO MORE!

WELL, ROM, DO YOU NEED AN ENGRAVED INVITATION? THE CREATURE BIDS US SLAY IT! LET ME STRIKE!
WAIT, STARSHINE! HEAR YOU NOT HOW IT SOBS AND MEWLS, LIKE AN INFANT TAKEN TOO SOON FROM ITS CRADLE?
AND IT HAS CHARGED US WITH THE DEATH OF ITS PARENTS!
ROM'S ENERGY ANALYZER IS TURNED UPON THE CRYING CREATURE, AND THE SILVER SPACEKNIGHT GASPS AT THAT WHICH IT REVEALS...
THE CREATURE, THOUGH A WRAITH, IS NO MORE THAN A CHILD!
IF IT IS A CHILD, ROM, IT IS A CHILD THAT HAS TERRORIZED ALREADY! A CHILD THAT HAS KILLED!
PERHAPS IT WAS DRIVEN TO DO SO, STAR-SHINE--
--BY ITS MISCONCEPTION THAT WE SLEW ITS PARENTS, WHO I AM SURE I MERELY BANISHED TO LIMBO.
YOU'RE GOING TO TELL ME THAT IMMATURITY EXCUSES WHAT THIS CREATURE HAS DONE...?
ARRGH!
SENSING THAT SOME IMPONDERABLE MORAL QUESTION HAS CAUSED THE SPACEKNIGHTS TO LOWER THEIR GUARD, THE DEATHWING STRIKES!
GODS OF GALADOR, ROM! A WRAITH IS A WRAITH, NO MATTER HOW YOUNG--
--AND THE WHOLE VILE RACE IS WORTHY ONLY OF DESTRUCTION!
SKR
EEE
STARSHINE'S LIGHT-EYES SEAR THE SCREAMING SAURIAN...


BUT, BEFORE SHE CAN BRING ABOUT ITS DEMISE, ROM'S NEUTRALIZER IS CALLED INTO PLAY. THUS DIMENSIONAL PORTALS RIP WIDE THE WALLS BETWEEN EARTH AND OTHER PLANES...
...AND THE CRYING CREATURE PLUNGES THROUGH TO JOIN OTHERS OF ITS KIND IN THE FRIGID, SHADOWY INSUBSTANTIAL REALM OF LIMBO. HERE ITS BURNING FLESH WILL HEAL AND IT WILL BE RENDERED INCAPABLE OF CAUSING ANY FURTHER HARM.
YOU'RE MAD, ROM, TO SHOW MERCY TO AN ENEMY YOU HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO SLAY!
THE CREATURE WAS BUT A CHILD, STARSHINE, ORPHANED BY US, NOT EVEN SURE WHY IT ACTED AS IT DID...
IT WAS A HULKING HORROR, ROM! HAD IT LIVED TO ADULTHOOD, IT WOULD HAVE MURDERED DOZENS OF TIMES OVER!
AND YET, THERE IS A CHANCE THAT IT MIGHT NOT HAVE DONE SO...
...HAD WE SHOWN IT KINDNESS, TUTORED IT IN THE WAYS OF GOOD INSTEAD OF EVIL.
I ONCE KNEW A WRAITH WHO TURNED AWAY FROM HATE AND DISCOVERED LOVE...
...EVEN AS YOU, MY BELOVED BRANDY, HAVE TURNED FROM LOVE TO ALL-CONSUMING HATE.
AN IMAGE OF THE WOMAN STARSHINE ONCE WAS RISES IN ROM'S MIND'S EYE, THEN FADES--


--AS EPHEMERAL AND ETHEREAL AS THE STEAM RISING FROM THE BOILING RIVER WATERS WHERE ROM'S NEUTRALIZER OPENED THE WAY BETWEEN DIMENSIONS.
BUT THE PORTAL IS CLOSED NOW, THE WRAITH IS GONE...
...AND THE DISTRAUGHT SPACEKNIGHT TURNS TO REJOIN A WAR HE HAS FOUGHT FOR FAR TOO LONG.
BEHIND HIM, UNNOTICED, THE RIVER'S WATERS FROTH AND BOIL.
THE DOORWAY BETWEEN DIMENSIONS, OPENED BY ROM'S NEUTRALIZER, REMAINED OPEN A SCANT FRACTION OF A SECOND LONGER THAN HE EITHER REALIZED OR ANTICIPATED.
IN THAT MICROSECOND, SOMETHING SLIPPED FROM ONE PLANE OF REALITY INTO OUR OWN.
SOMETHING WHICH IS NOW SWEPT SOUTHWARDS, AWAY FROM THE CITY, ON THE SWIFT RIVER CURRENTS...
SOUTHWARDS, OUT PAST A PASTURELAND WHERE THE RIVER WIDENS, AND MOVES WITH A STATELY SLOWNESS...
...JUST TO NARROW AGAIN AND ACCELERATE AS IT IS WHIPPED INTO FRENZIED RAPIDS AND FED BY SWIFT-FLOWING MOUNTAIN STREAMS.
THE SOMETHING STAYS WITH THE RIVER ALL THAT WAY.

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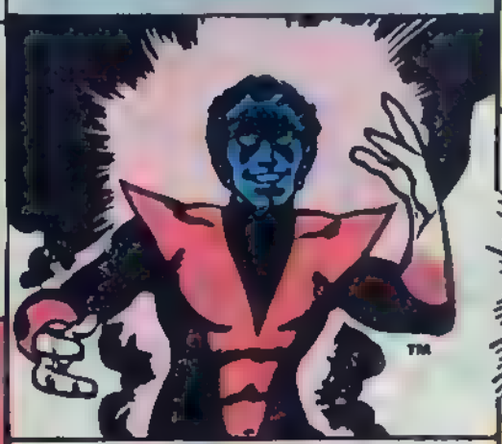

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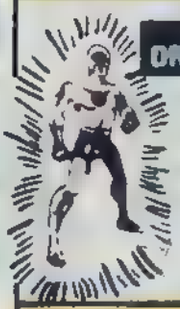

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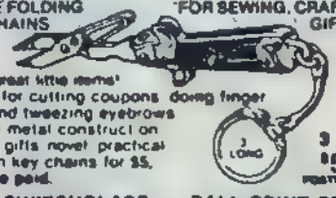

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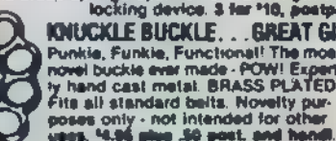

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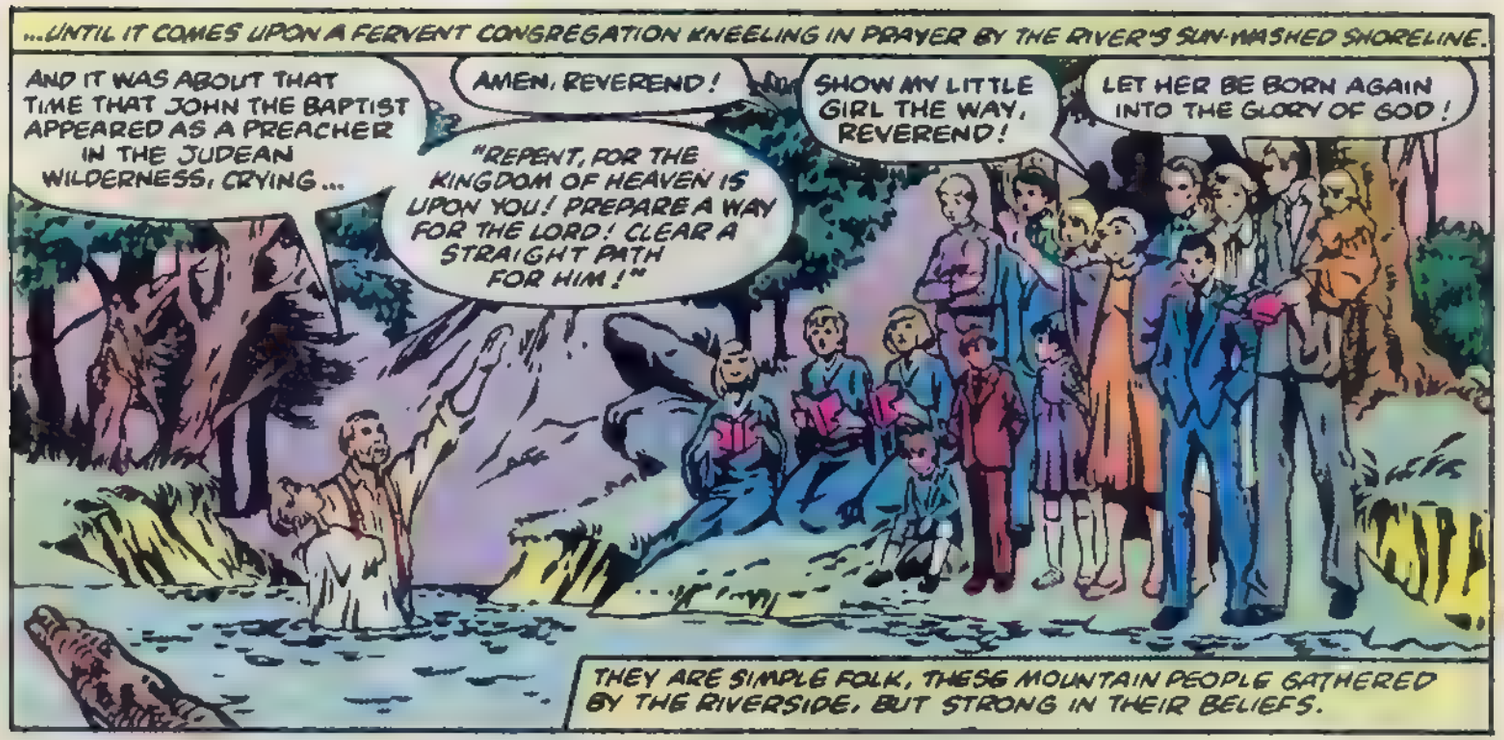
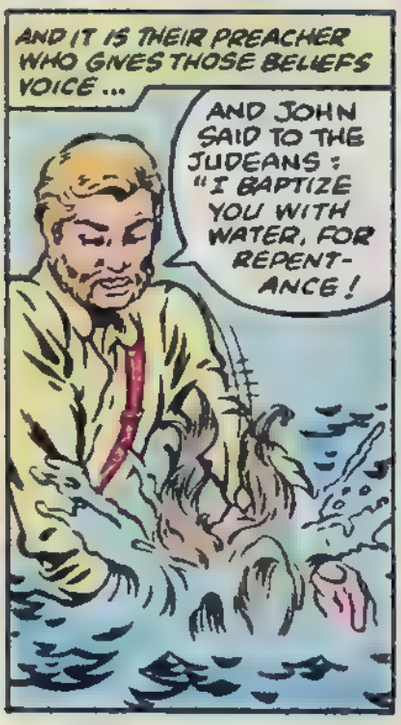
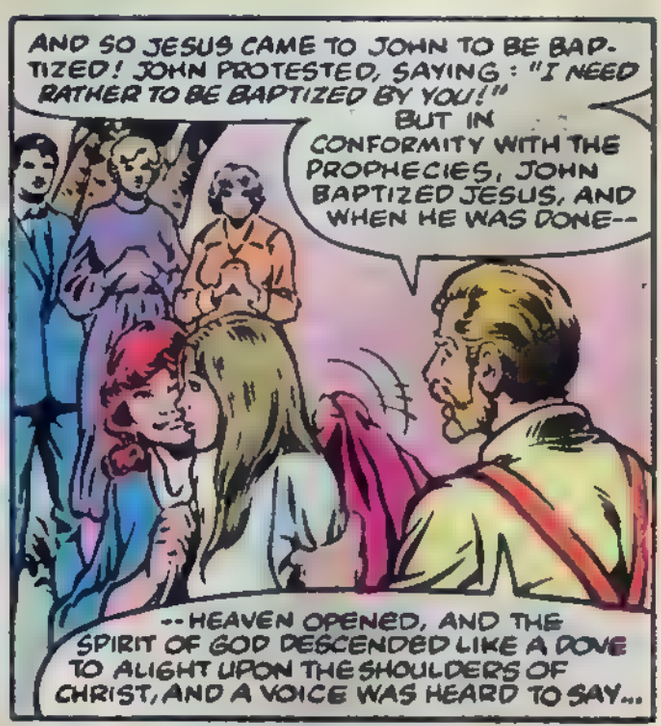
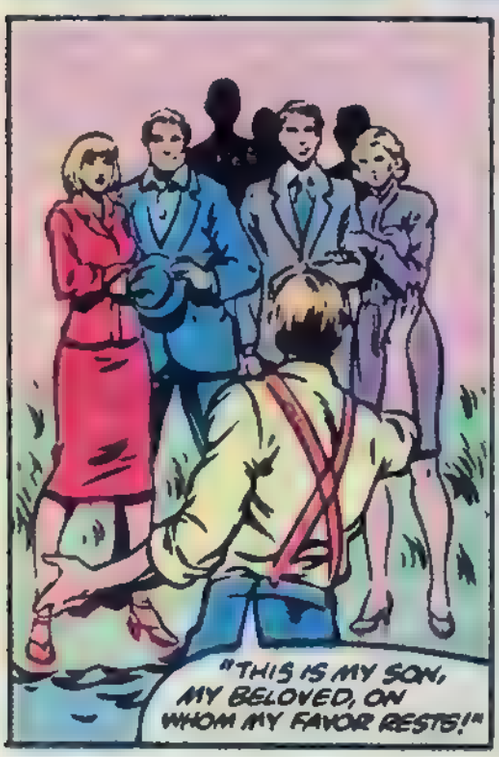
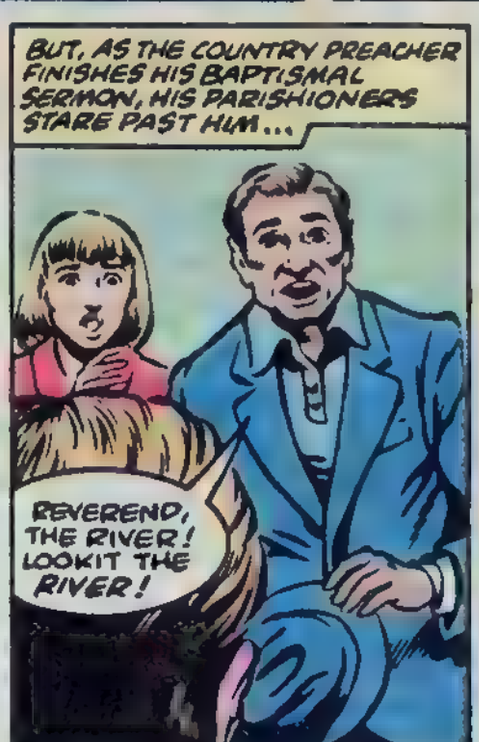

...UNTIL IT COMES UPON A FERVENT CONGREGATION KNEELING IN PRAYER BY THE RIVER'S SUN-WASHED SHORELINE.
AND IT WAS ABOUT THAT TIME THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST APPEARED AS A PREACHER IN THE JUDEAN WILDERNESS, CRYING...
"REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS UPON YOU! PREPARE A WAY FOR THE LORD! CLEAR A STRAIGHT PATH FOR HIM!"
AMEN, REVEREND!
SHOW MY LITTLE GIRL THE WAY, REVEREND!
LET HER BE BORN AGAIN INTO THE GLORY OF GOD!
THEY ARE SIMPLE FOLK, THESE MOUNTAIN PEOPLE GATHERED BY THE RIVERSIDE, BUT STRONG IN THEIR BELIEFS.

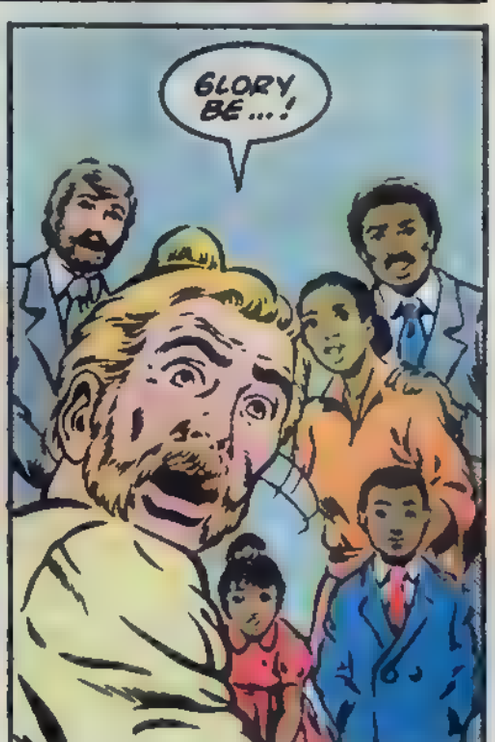

AND IT IS THEIR PREACHER WHO GIVES THOSE BELIEFS VOICE...
AND JOHN SAID TO THE JUDEANS: "I BAPTIZE YOU WITH WATER, FOR REPENTANCE!

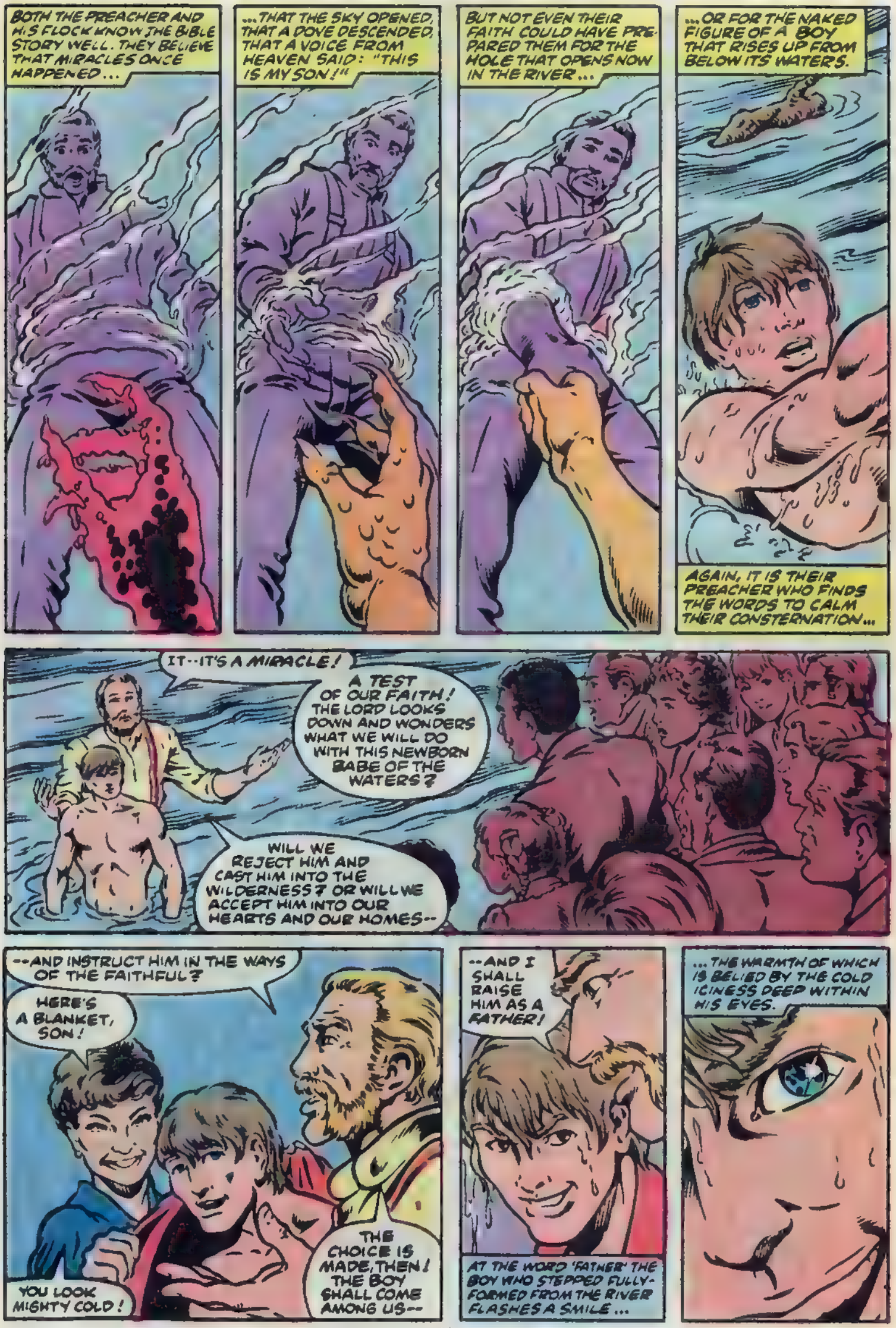
"BUT THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER ME IS MIGHTIER THAN I! HE WILL BAPTIZE YOU WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND WITH FIRE!"


AND SO JESUS CAME TO JOHN TO BE BAPTIZED! JOHN PROTESTED, SAYING: "I NEED RATHER TO BE BAPTIZED BY YOU!"
BUT IN CONFORMITY WITH THE PROPHECIES, JOHN BAPTIZED JESUS, AND WHEN HE WAS DONE--
--HEAVEN OPENED, AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD DESCENDED LIKE A DOVE TO ALIGHT UPON THE SHOULDERS OF CHRIST, AND A VOICE WAS HEARD TO SAY...

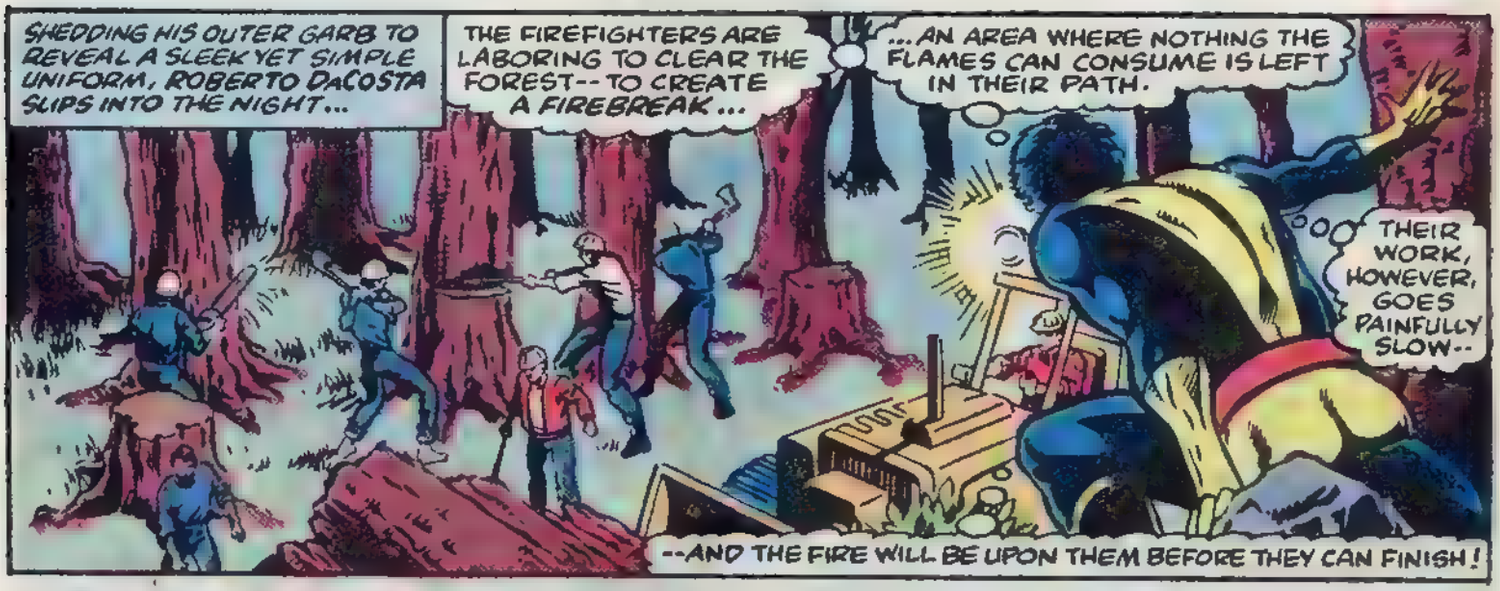

"THIS IS MY SON, MY BELOVED, ON WHOM MY FAVOR RESTS!"

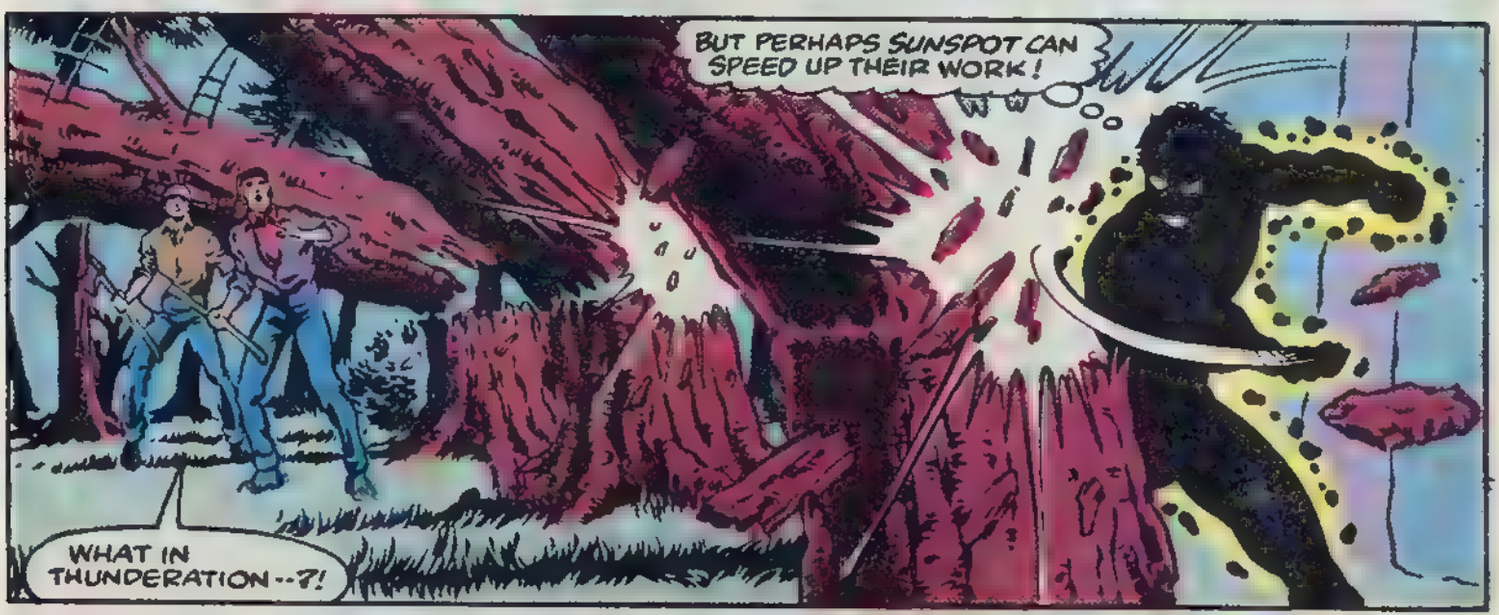

BUT, AS THE COUNTRY PREACHER FINISHES HIS BAPTISMAL SERMON, HIS PARISHIONERS STARE PAST HIM...
REVEREND, THE RIVER! LOOKIT THE RIVER!

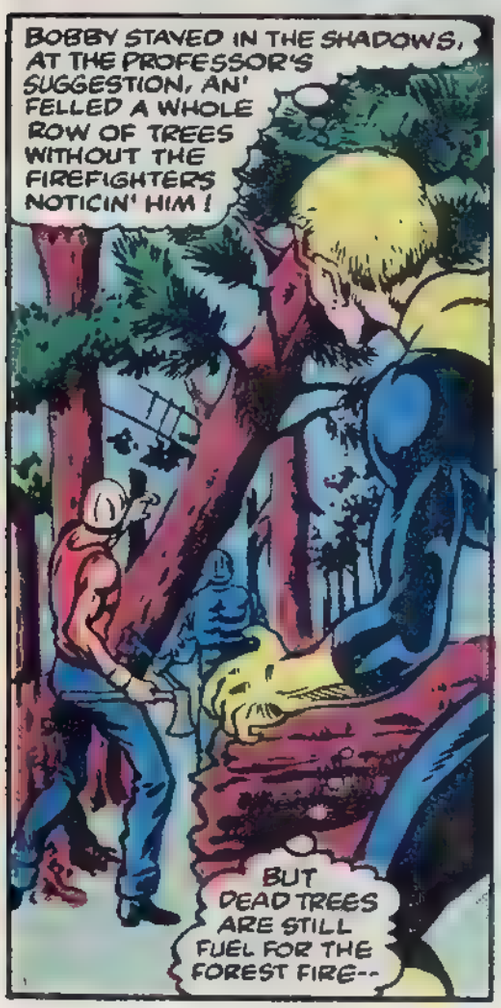

GLORY BE...!

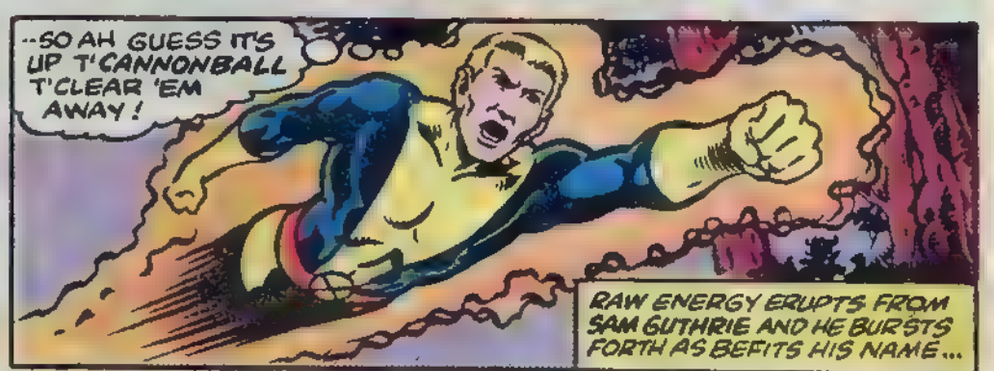

BOTH THE PREACHER AND HIS FLOCK KNOW THE BIBLE STORY WELL. THEY BELIEVE THAT MIRACLES ONCE HAPPENED...
...THAT THE SKY OPENED, THAT A DOVE DESCENDED, THAT A VOICE FROM HEAVEN SAID: "THIS IS MY SON!"
BUT NOT EVEN THEIR FAITH COULD HAVE PREPARED THEM FOR THE HOLE THAT OPENS NOW IN THE RIVER...
...OR FOR THE NAKED FIGURE OF A BOY THAT RISES UP FROM BELOW ITS WATERS.
AGAIN, IT IS THEIR PREACHER WHO FINDS THE WORDS TO CALM THEIR CONSTERNATION...
IT--IT'S A MIRACLE!
A TEST OF OUR FAITH! THE LORD LOOKS DOWN AND WONDERS WHAT WE WILL DO WITH THIS NEWBORN BABE OF THE WATERS?
WILL WE REJECT HIM AND CAST HIM INTO THE WILDERNESS? OR WILL WE ACCEPT HIM INTO OUR HEARTS AND OUR HOMES--
--AND INSTRUCT HIM IN THE WAYS OF THE FAITHFUL?
HERE'S A BLANKET, SON!
YOU LOOK MIGHTY COLD!
THE CHOICE IS MADE, THEN! THE BOY SHALL COME AMONG US--
--AND I SHALL RAISE HIM AS A FATHER!
AT THE WORD 'FATHER' THE BOY WHO STEPPED FULLY-FORMED FROM THE RIVER FLASHES A SMILE...
...THE WARMTH OF WHICH IS BELIED BY THE COLD ICINESS DEEP WITHIN HIS EYES.

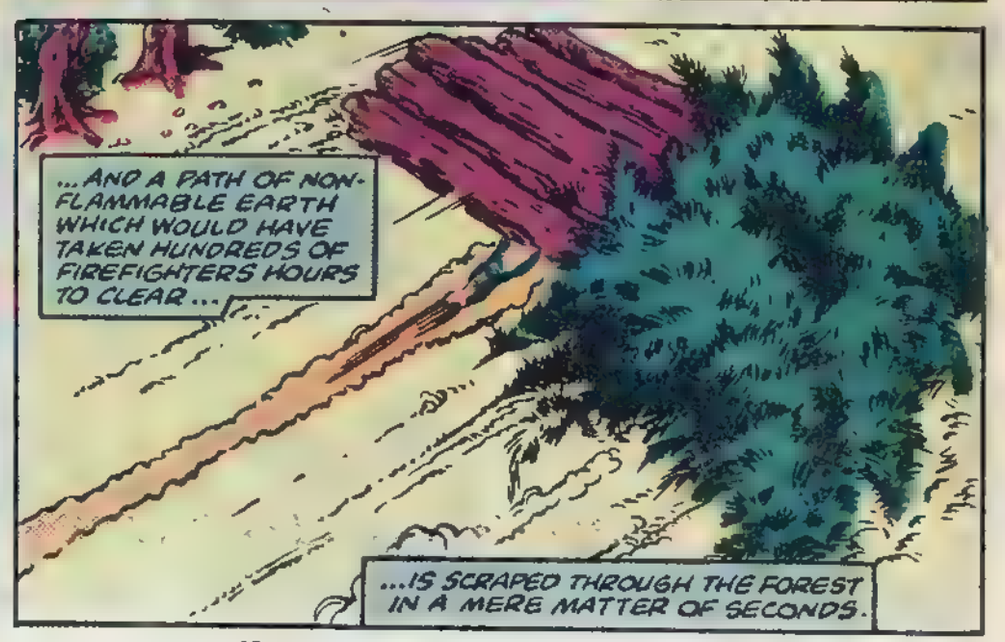
SEVERAL WEEKS LATER, ON A WINDING APPALACHIAN HIGHWAY...
ROADBLOCK! AND THERE'S THE SOURCE OF THAT RISING CLOUD OF SMOKE WE'VE HAD UNDER OBSERVATION FOR THE LAST FIFTEEN MILES!
MADRE DE DIOS... A FOREST FIRE!
IT CONSUMES THE MOUNTAINSIDE, ROBERTO, LIKE SOME FIERY GOD.
SAM...?
THAT'S MY HOMETOWN CUT OFF BY THE FIRE, PROFESSOR!
GET BACK IN YOUR CAR, KID!
THERE AIN'T NO WAY ANYONE'S REACHIN' CUMBERLAND NOW!
BUT MY MOM! MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS!
EASY, AMIGO!
IF ONLY STORM WERE HERE! SHE'D CALL DOWN THE RAIN TO EXTINGUISH THE FIRE!
YES... IF STORM STILL POSSESSED HER POWERS! *
* STORM'S POWERS WERE STRIPPED FROM HER IN X-MEN #185.
WE CAN WISH THE X-MEN WERE HERE, MY FRIENDS--OR WE CAN DO SOMETHING OURSELVES! FOLLOW ME!

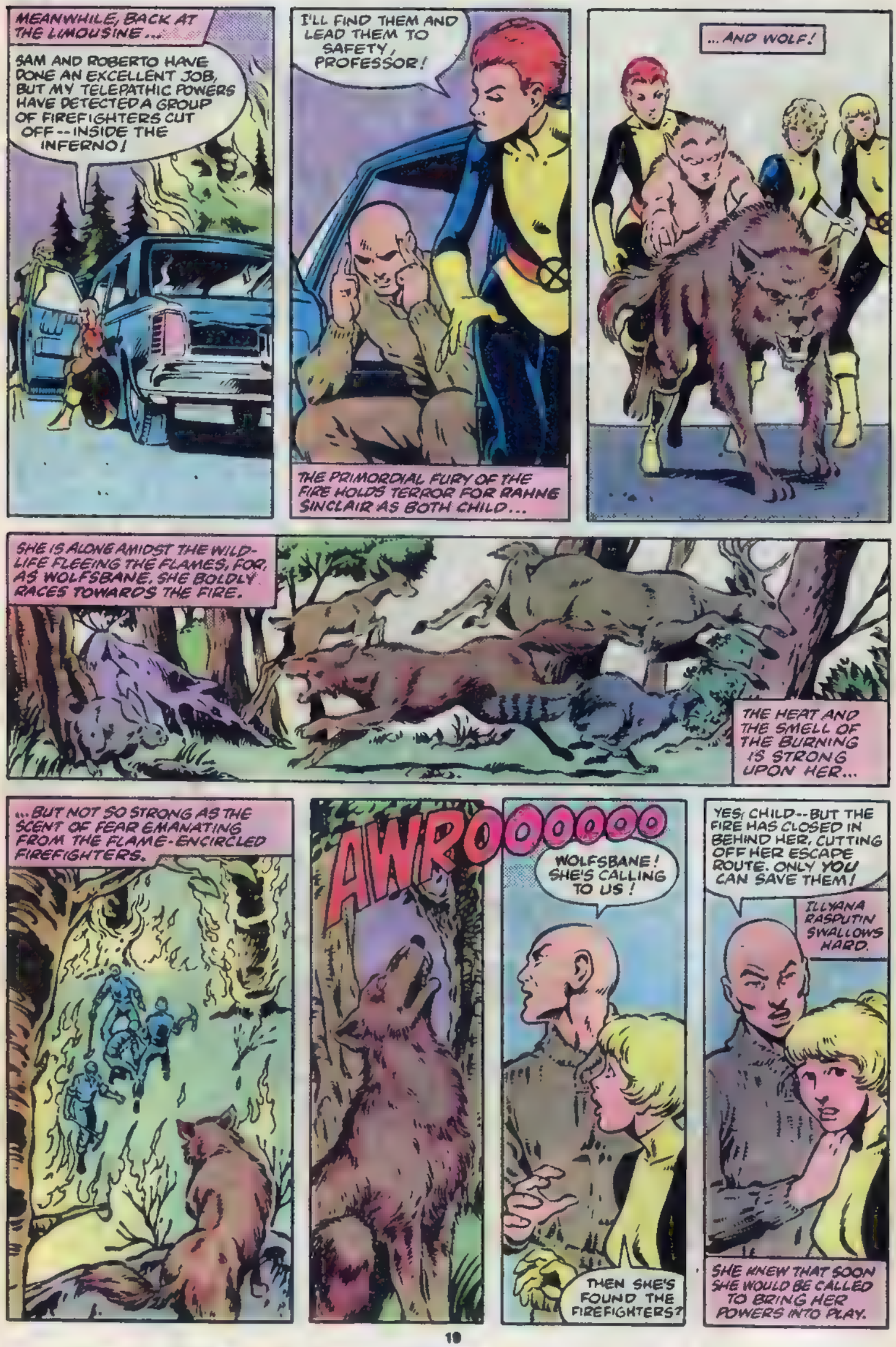

SHEDDING HIS OUTER GARB TO REVEAL A SLEEK YET SIMPLE UNIFORM, ROBERTO DaCOSTA SLIPS INTO THE NIGHT...
THE FIREFIGHTERS ARE LABORING TO CLEAR THE FOREST--TO CREATE A FIREBREAK...
...AN AREA WHERE NOTHING THE FLAMES CAN CONSUME IS LEFT IN THEIR PATH.
THEIR WORK, HOWEVER, GOES PAINFULLY SLOW--
--AND THE FIRE WILL BE UPON THEM BEFORE THEY CAN FINISH!


BUT PERHAPS SUNSPOT CAN SPEED UP THEIR WORK!
WHAT IN THUNDERATION--?!

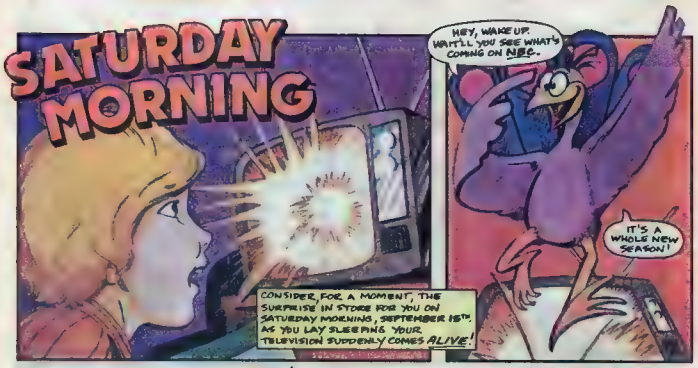

BOBBY STAYED IN THE SHADOWS, AT THE PROFESSOR'S SUGGESTION, AN' FELLED A WHOLE ROW OF TREES WITHOUT THE FIREFIGHTERS NOTICIN' HIM!
BUT DEAD TREES ARE STILL FUEL FOR THE FOREST FIRE--


--SO AH GUESS IT'S UP T'CANNONBALL T'CLEAR 'EM AWAY!
RAW ENERGY ERUPTS FROM SAM GUTHRIE AND HE BURSTS FORTH AS BEFITS HIS NAME...


...AND A PATH OF NON-FLAMMABLE EARTH WHICH WOULD HAVE TAKEN HUNDREDS OF FIREFIGHTERS HOURS TO CLEAR...
...IS SCRAPED THROUGH THE FOREST IN A MERE MATTER OF SECONDS.

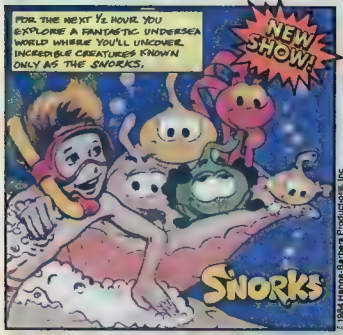

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE LIMOUSINE...
SAM AND ROBERTO HAVE DONE AN EXCELLENT JOB, BUT MY TELEPATHIC POWERS HAVE DETECTED A GROUP OF FIREFIGHTERS CUT OFF--INSIDE THE INFERNO!
I'LL FIND THEM AND LEAD THEM TO SAFETY, PROFESSOR!
THE PRIMORDIAL FURY OF THE FIRE HOLDS TERROR FOR RAHNE SINCLAIR AS BOTH CHILD...
...AND WOLF!
SHE IS ALONE AMIDST THE WILD-LIFE FLEEING THE FLAMES, FOR, AS WOLFSBANE, SHE BOLDLY RACES TOWARDS THE FIRE.
THE HEAT AND THE SMELL OF THE BURNING IS STRONG UPON HER...
...BUT NOT SO STRONG AS THE SCENT OF FEAR EMANATING FROM THE FLAME-ENCIRCLED FIREFIGHTERS.
AWROOOOOOO
WOLFSBANE! SHE'S CALLING TO US!
THEN SHE'S FOUND THE FIREFIGHTERS?
YES, CHILD--BUT THE FIRE HAS CLOSED IN BEHIND HER, CUTTING OFF HER ESCAPE ROUTE. ONLY YOU CAN SAVE THEM!
ILLYANA RASPUTIN SWALLOWS HARD.
SHE KNEW THAT SOON SHE WOULD BE CALLED TO BRING HER POWERS INTO PLAY.

PERHAPS I CAN TELEPORT TO THEM, PROFESSOR-- BUT THEN WHAT?
I HAVE SO LITTLE CONTROL OVER MY POWERS THAT NONE OF US MIGHT EVER GET BACK!
ILLYANA, I UNDERSTAND THE FEAR THAT IMMOBILIZES YOU ...
...BUT YOU ARE THEIR ONLY HOPE.
ILLYANA'S TELEPORT-CIRCLE WHISKS HER AWAY...
...JUST AS WOLFSBANE LEAPS IN AMONG THE FIREFIGHTERS.
LORD, A WOLF! IT MUST BE CRAZED FROM THE FIRE!
WHAT'LL WE DO IF IT ATTACKS?!
IT WON'T ATTACK. IT'S COME TO SAVE YOU.
THE HEAT MUST BE MAKIN' ME SEE THINGS! A GIRL-- APPEARIN' OUT OF THE SMOKE!
THERE'S NO TIME TO DEBATE MY EXISTENCE... YOU MUST JOIN ME IN ESCAPING BEFORE WE'RE ALL FRIED BY THE FIRE.
ILLYANA'S VOICE IS AS COLD AS ICE.
BY STEELING HERSELF, SHE HOPES TO INFUSE BOTH THE FIREFIGHTERS AND HERSELF WITH THE COURAGE ...
...TO SURVIVE TELEPORTATION THROUGH THE HELLISH REALM CALLED LIMBO...
...AND EMERGE WITH THEIR SANITY INTACT!
WE-WE'VE BEEN SAVED FROM THE FIRE!
BUT, HOW--?
I DON'T THINK I EVER WANT TO KNOW!


SATURDAY MORNING
HEY, WAKE UP. WAIT'LL YOU SEE WHAT'S COMING ON NBC.
IT'S A WHOLE NEW SEASON!
CONSIDER, FOR A MOMENT, THE SURPRISE IN STORE FOR YOU ON SATURDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 15TH AS YOU LAY SLEEPING YOUR TELEVISION SUDDENLY COMES ALIVE!

NEXT, KIDD VIDEO WILL TAKE YOU TO THE FLIP SIDE OF THE UNIVERSE WHERE THE MATTER BLASTER IS WAGING A BATTLE TO RULE THE ENTIRE ROCK AND ROLL WORLD.
NEW SHOW!
KIDD VIDEO
©DIC and Saban Enterprises 1984

BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, MR. T WILL TAKE OVER...
PITY THE POOR FOOL WHO MESSES WITH THE CHANNEL CHANGER!
RIGHT, T!
MISTER T
©1984 Ruby-Spears Enterprises, Inc.


FOR THE NEXT ½ HOUR YOU EXPLORE A FANTASTIC UNDERSEA WORLD WHERE YOU'LL UNCOVER INCREDIBLE CREATURES KNOWN ONLY AS THE SNORKS.
NEW SHOW!
SNORKS
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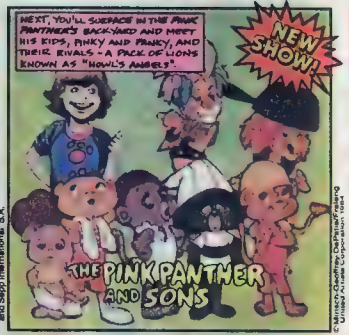
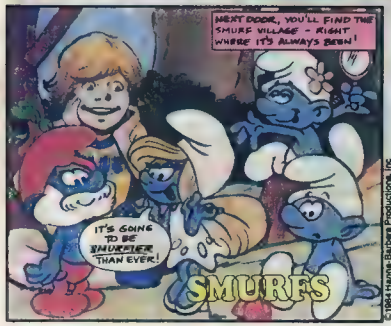
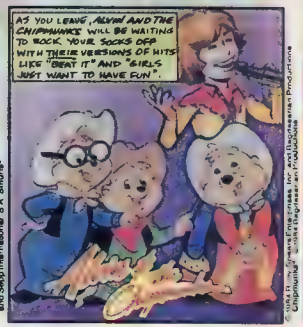
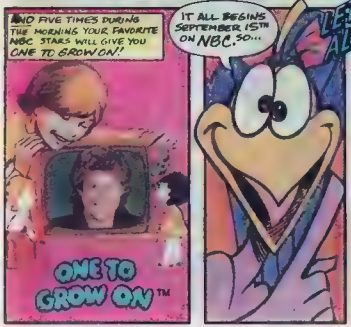

NEXT, YOU'LL SURFACE IN THE PINK PANTHER'S BACKYARD AND MEET HIS KIDS, PINKY AND PINKY, AND THEIR RIVALS - A PACK OF LIONS KNOWN AS "HOWLY'S ANGELS".
NEW SHOW!
THE PINK PANTHER AND SONS
©1984 Mirisch-Geoffrey-DePatie-Freleng

BY THE TIME HE'S DONE, YOU'LL BE GOING BANANAS WITH A REAL LIFE ORANGUTAN NAMED ROXANNA BANANA.
NEW SHOW!
GOING BANANAS
©1984 Hanna Barbera Productions, Inc

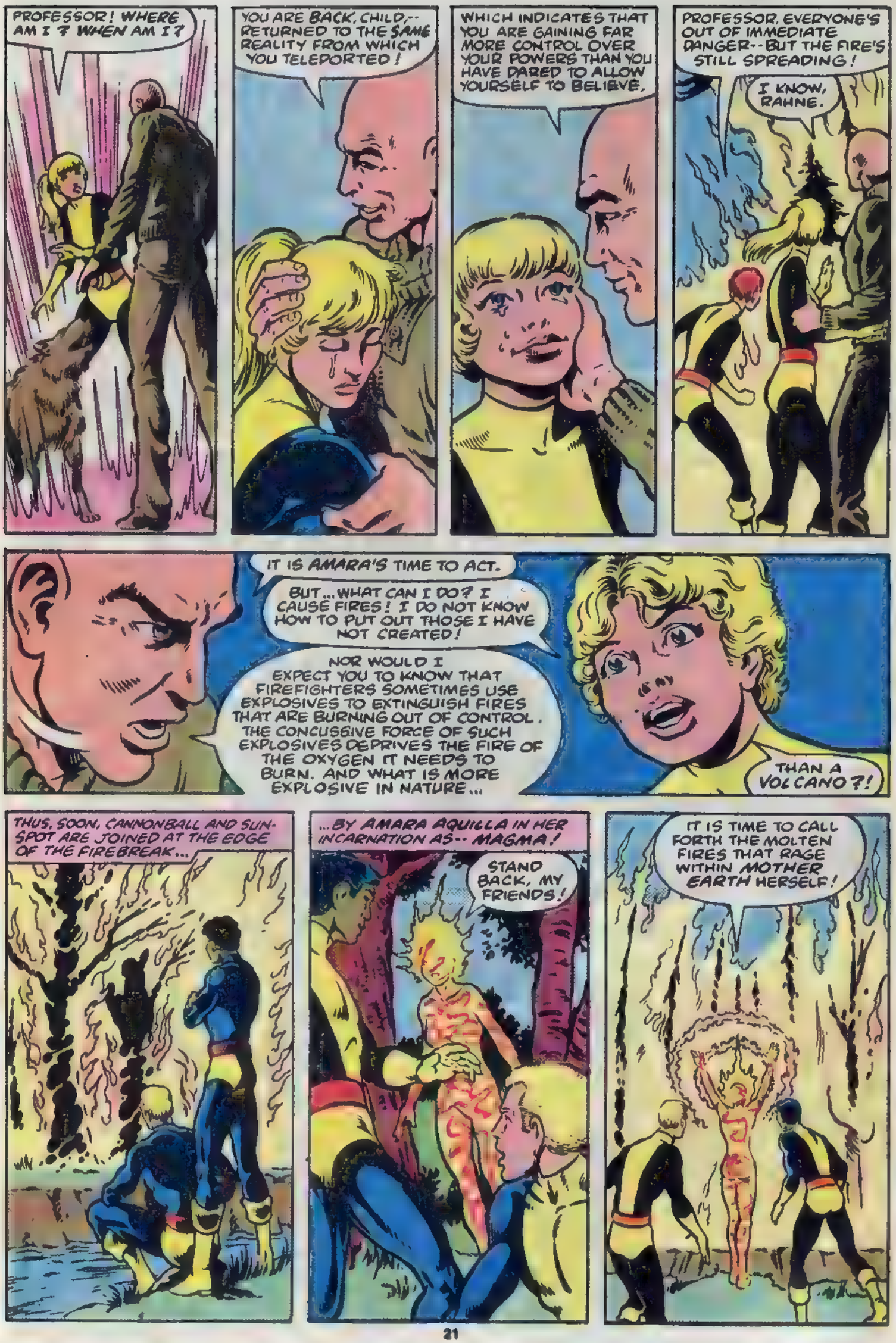
THEN SPIDER-MAN AND HIS AMAZING FRIENDS WILL JOIN FORCES TO MAKE THE WHOLE WORLD SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY... 'SPECIALLY ON YOUR BLOCK!
SPIDER-MAN AND HIS AMAZING FRIENDS
©1983 Marvel Comics Group, Inc.

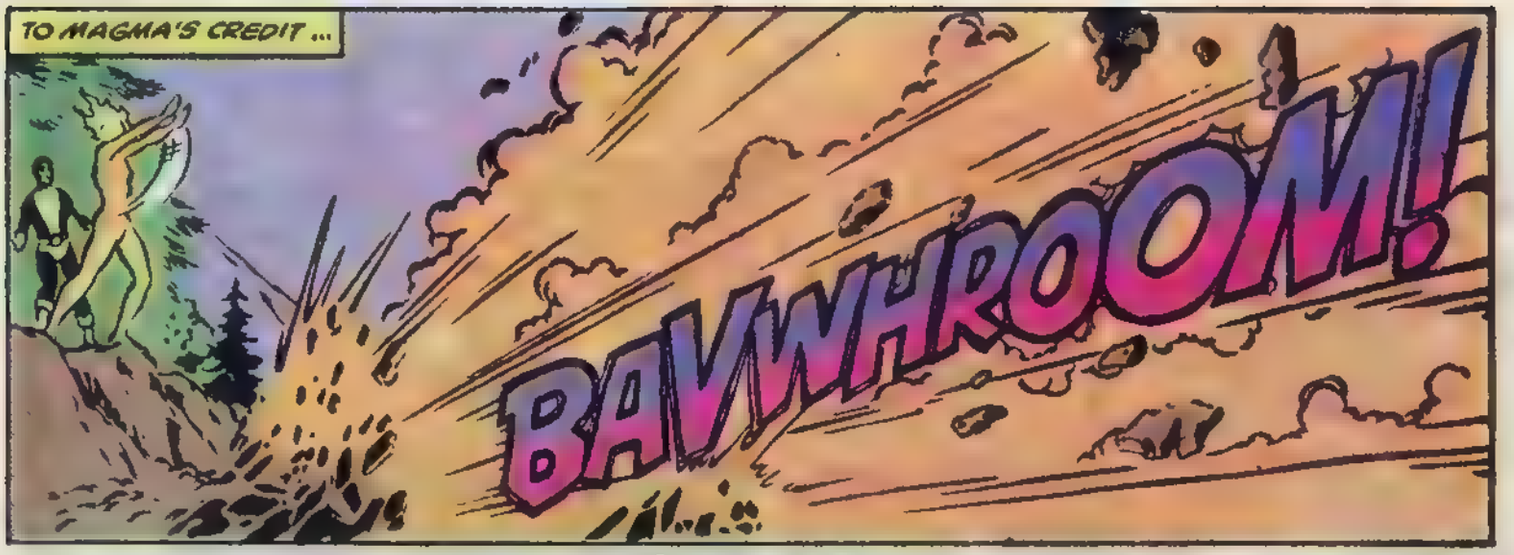

NEXT DOOR, YOU'LL FIND THE SMURF VILLAGE - RIGHT WHERE IT'S ALWAYS BEEN!
IT'S GOING TO BE SMURFIER THAN EVER!
SMURFS
©1984 Hanna Barbera Productions, Inc and Sepp Imamoto S.A. Smurfs

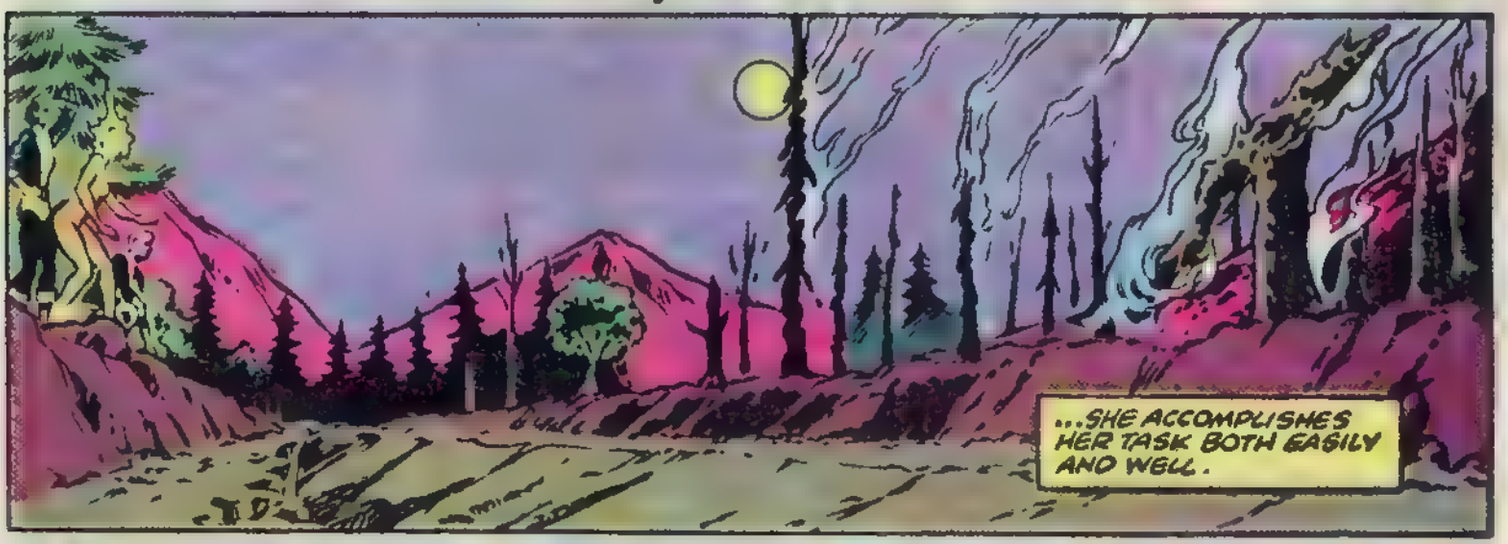

AS YOU LEAVE, ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS WILL BE WAITING TO ROCK YOUR SOCKS OFF WITH THEIR VERSIONS OF HITS LIKE "BEAT IT" AND "GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN".
©1984 Bagdasarian Productions


AND FIVE TIMES DURING THE MORNING YOUR FAVORITE NBC STARS WILL GIVE YOU ONE TO GROW ON!
ONE TO GROW ON™
IT ALL BEGINS SEPTEMBER 15TH ON NBC. SO...
LET'S ALL

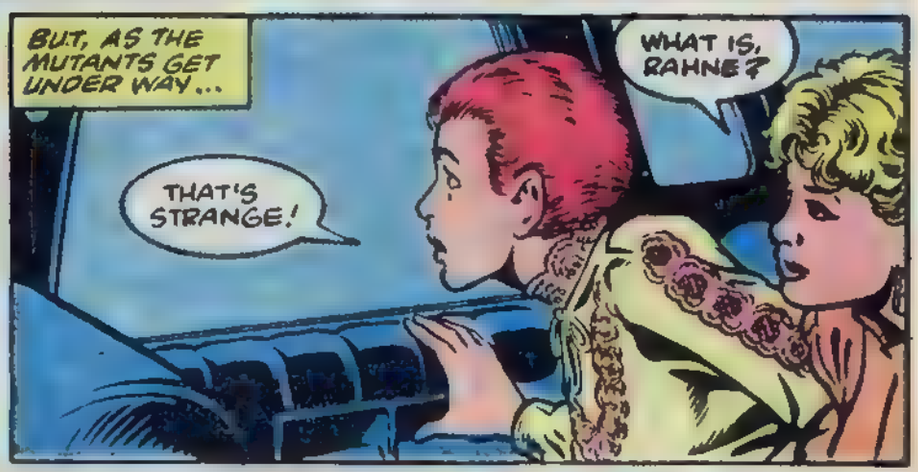
BE THERE
NBC

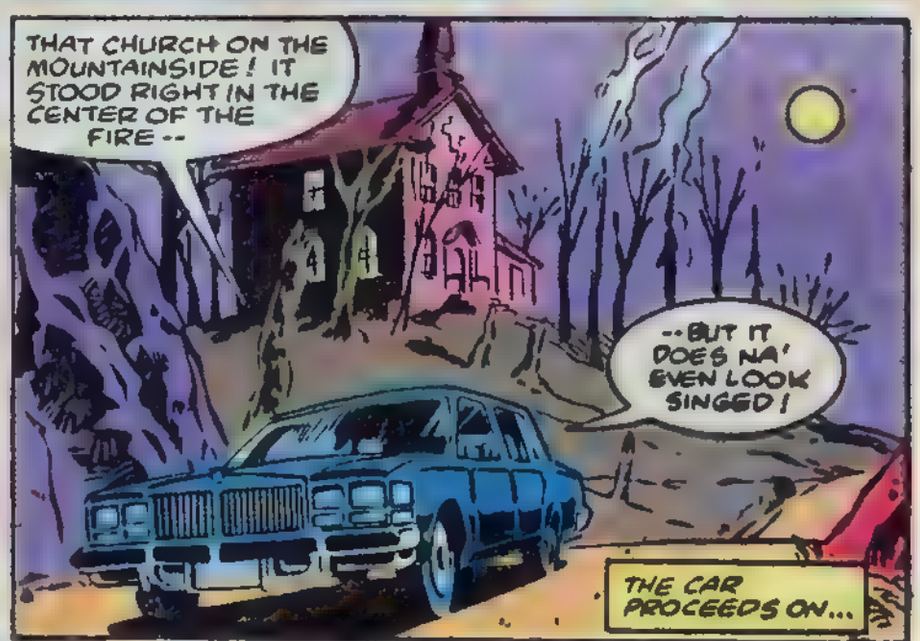

PROFESSOR! WHERE AM I? WHEN AM I?
YOU ARE BACK, CHILD,-- RETURNED TO THE SAME REALITY FROM WHICH YOU TELEPORTED!
WHICH INDICATES THAT YOU ARE GAINING FAR MORE CONTROL OVER YOUR POWERS THAN YOU HAVE DARED TO ALLOW YOURSELF TO BELIEVE.
PROFESSOR, EVERYONE'S OUT OF IMMEDIATE DANGER--BUT THE FIRE'S STILL SPREADING!
I KNOW, RAHNE.
IT IS AMARA'S TIME TO ACT.
BUT...WHAT CAN I DO? I CAUSE FIRES! I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO PUT OUT THOSE I HAVE NOT CREATED!
NOR WOULD I EXPECT YOU TO KNOW THAT FIREFIGHTERS SOMETIMES USE EXPLOSIVES TO EXTINGUISH FIRES THAT ARE BURNING OUT OF CONTROL. THE CONCUSSIVE FORCE OF SUCH EXPLOSIVES DEPRIVES THE FIRE OF THE OXYGEN IT NEEDS TO BURN. AND WHAT IS MORE EXPLOSIVE IN NATURE...
THAN A VOLCANO?!
THUS, SOON, CANNONBALL AND SUNSPOT ARE JOINED AT THE EDGE OF THE FIREBREAK...
...BY AMARA AQUILLA IN HER INCARNATION AS-- MAGMA!
STAND BACK, MY FRIENDS!
IT IS TIME TO CALL FORTH THE MOLTEN FIRES THAT RAGE WITHIN MOTHER EARTH HERSELF!

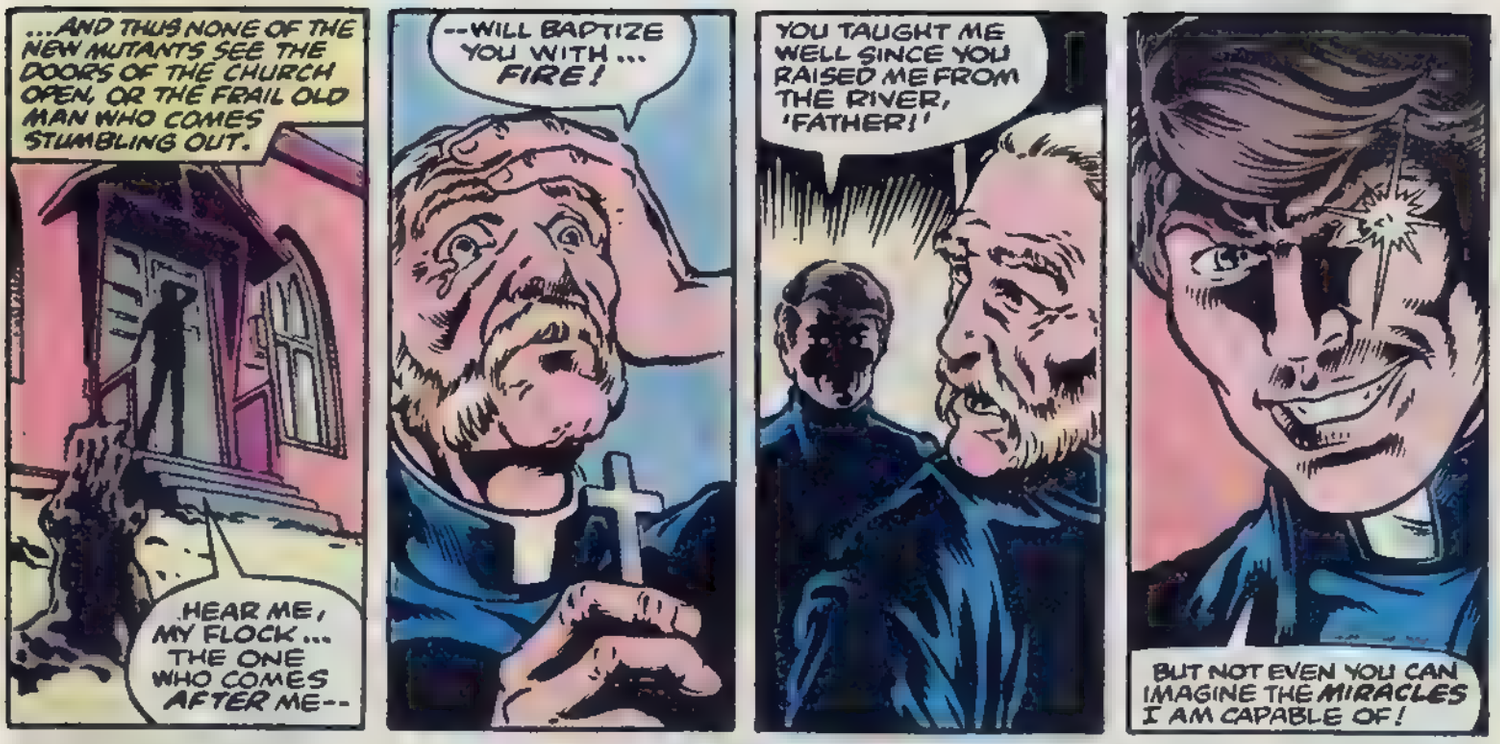

TO MAGMA'S CREDIT ...
BAWWHROOM!

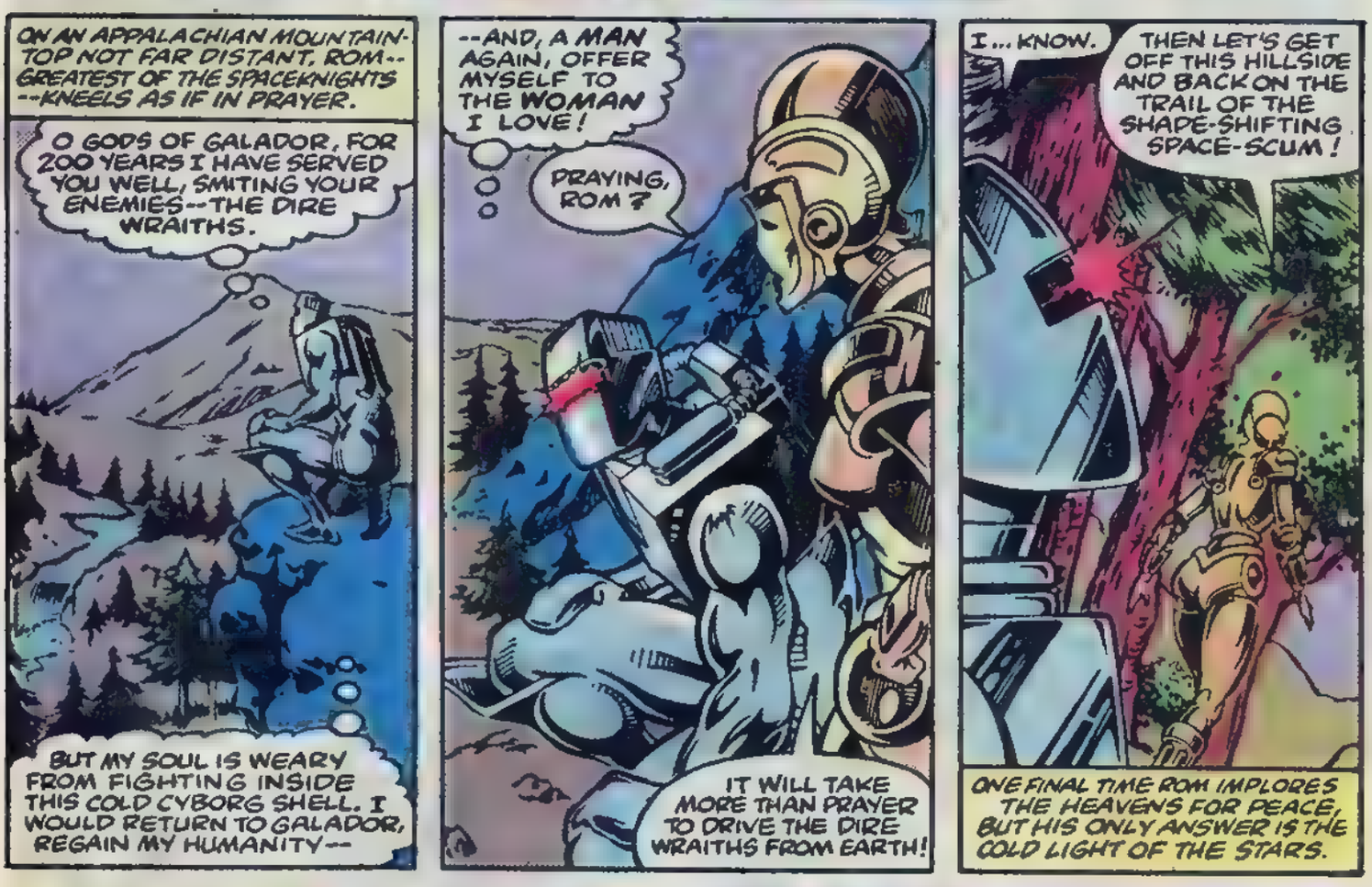

...SHE ACCOMPLISHES HER TASK BOTH EASILY AND WELL.

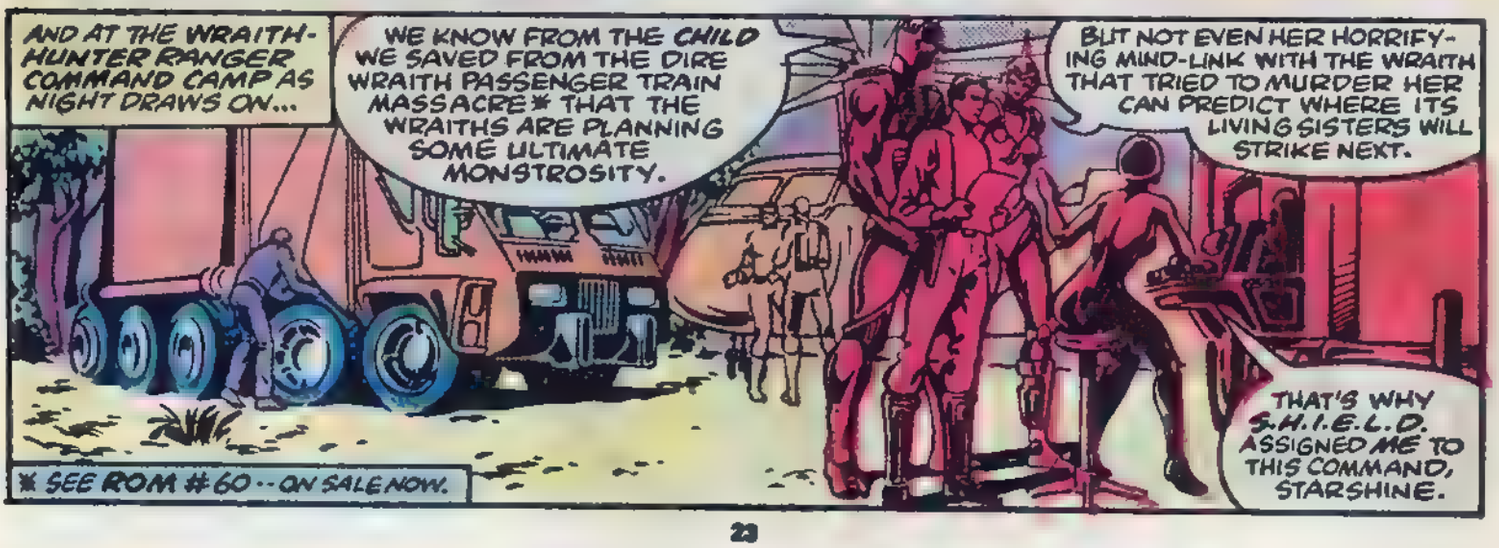
I SUGGEST WE CONTINUE WITH OUR JOURNEY NOW, CHILDREN.
?

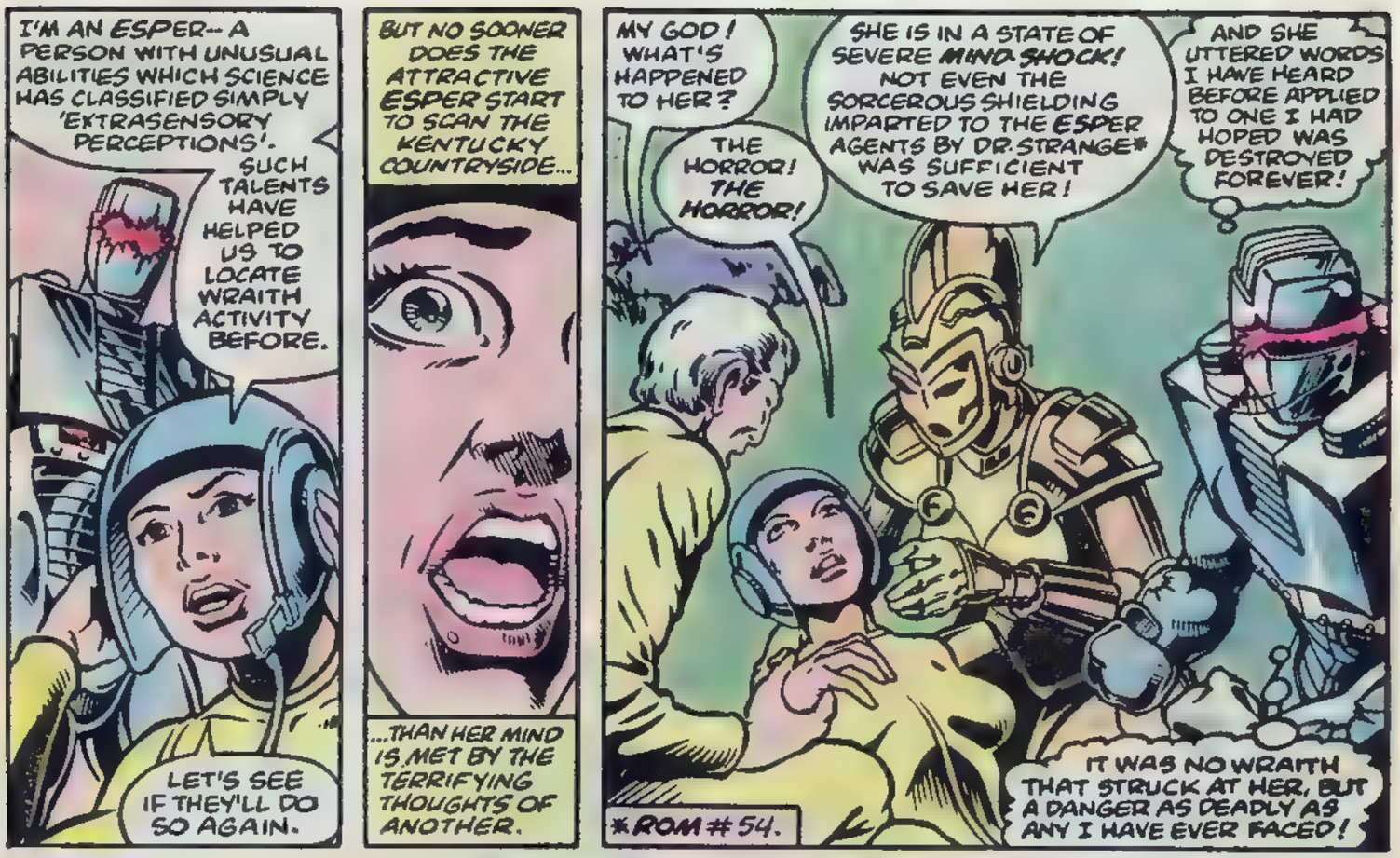

BUT, AS THE MUTANTS GET UNDER WAY...
WHAT IS, RAHNE?
THAT'S STRANGE!

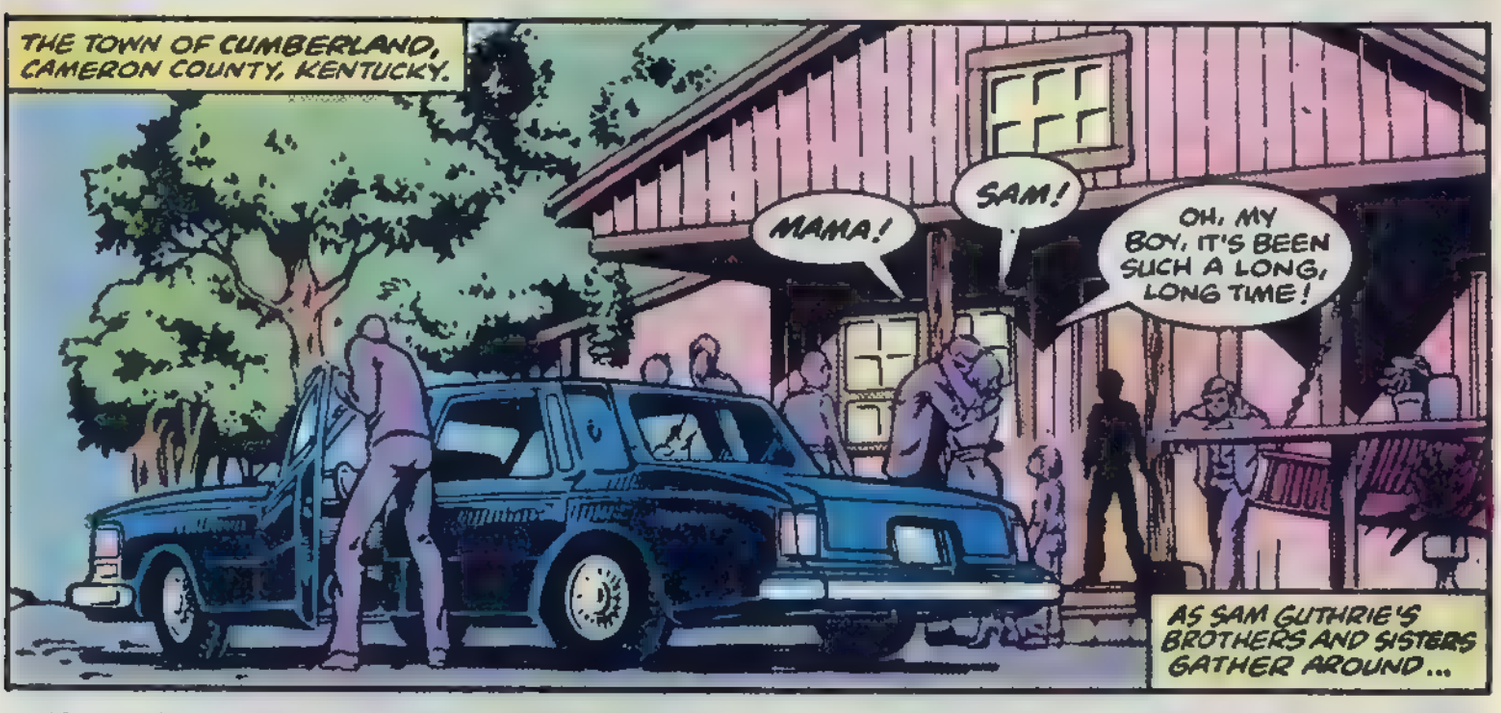

THAT CHURCH ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE! IT STOOD RIGHT IN THE CENTER OF THE FIRE --
--BUT IT DOES NA' EVEN LOOK SINGED!
THE CAR PROCEEDS ON...


...AND THUS NONE OF THE NEW MUTANTS SEE THE DOORS OF THE CHURCH OPEN, OR THE FRAIL OLD MAN WHO COMES STUMBLING OUT.
HEAR ME, MY FLOCK... THE ONE WHO COMES AFTER ME--
--WILL BAPTIZE YOU WITH... FIRE!
YOU TAUGHT ME WELL SINCE YOU RAISED ME FROM THE RIVER, 'FATHER!'
BUT NOT EVEN YOU CAN IMAGINE THE MIRACLES I AM CAPABLE OF!

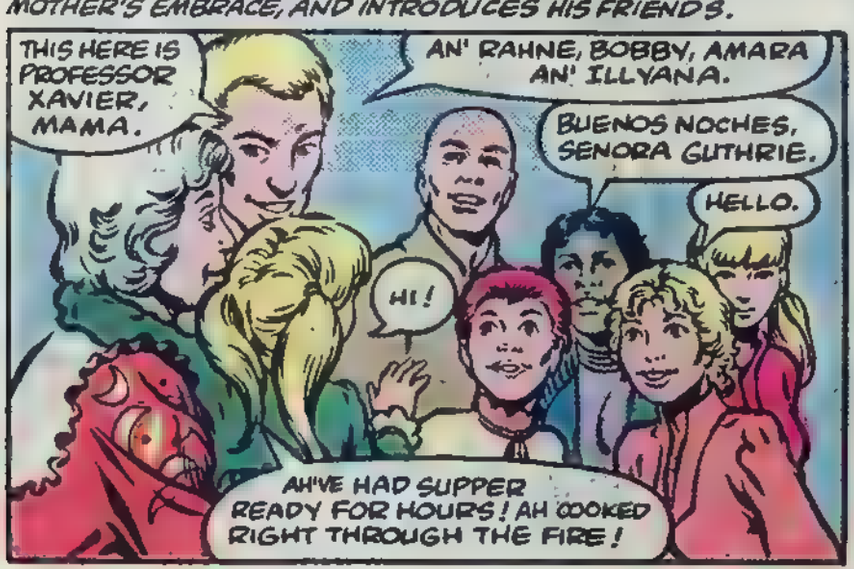

ON AN APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN-TOP NOT FAR DISTANT, ROM--GREATEST OF THE SPACEKNIGHTS--KNEELS AS IF IN PRAYER.
O GODS OF GALADOR, FOR 200 YEARS I HAVE SERVED YOU WELL, SMITING YOUR ENEMIES--THE DIRE WRAITHS.
BUT MY SOUL IS WEARY FROM FIGHTING INSIDE THIS COLD CYBORG SHELL. I WOULD RETURN TO GALADOR, REGAIN MY HUMANITY--
--AND, A MAN AGAIN, OFFER MYSELF TO THE WOMAN I LOVE!
PRAYING, ROM?
IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN PRAYER TO DRIVE THE DIRE WRAITHS FROM EARTH!
I... KNOW.
THEN LET'S GET OFF THIS HILLSIDE AND BACK ON THE TRAIL OF THE SHAPE-SHIFTING SPACE-SCUM!
ONE FINAL TIME ROM IMPLORES THE HEAVENS FOR PEACE, BUT HIS ONLY ANSWER IS THE COLD LIGHT OF THE STARS.

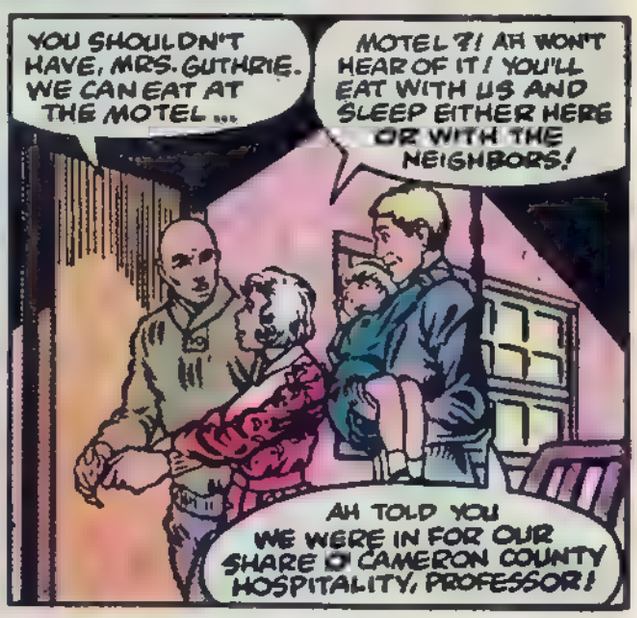

AND AT THE WRAITH-HUNTER RANGER COMMAND CAMP AS NIGHT DRAWS ON...
WE KNOW FROM THE CHILD WE SAVED FROM THE DIRE WRAITH PASSENGER TRAIN MASSACRE* THAT THE WRAITHS ARE PLANNING SOME ULTIMATE MONSTROSITY.
BUT NOT EVEN HER HORRIFYING MIND-LINK WITH THE WRAITH THAT TRIED TO MURDER HER CAN PREDICT WHERE ITS LIVING SISTERS WILL STRIKE NEXT.
THAT'S WHY S.H.I.E.L.D. ASSIGNED ME TO THIS COMMAND, STARSHINE.
* SEE ROM #60--ON SALE NOW.

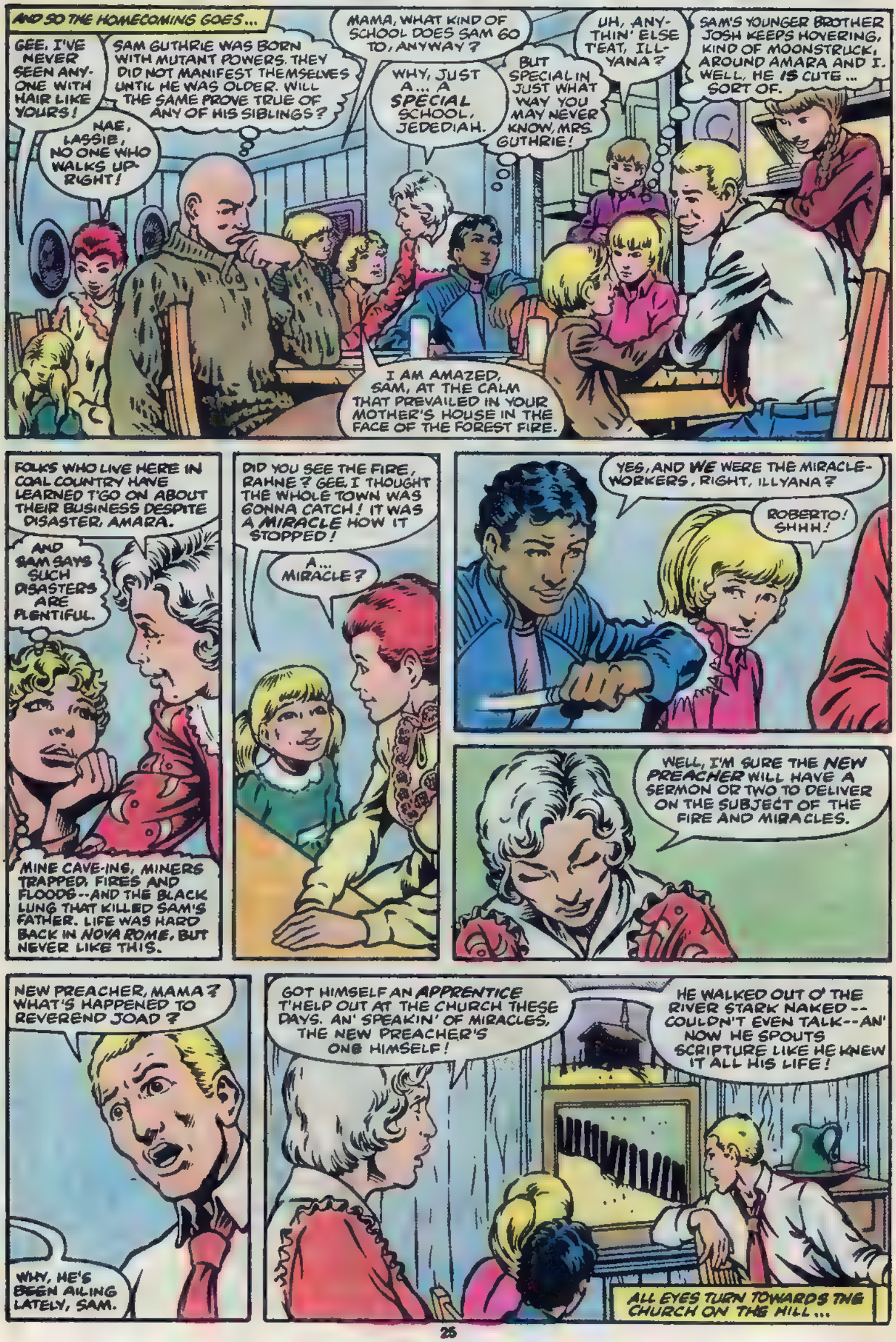


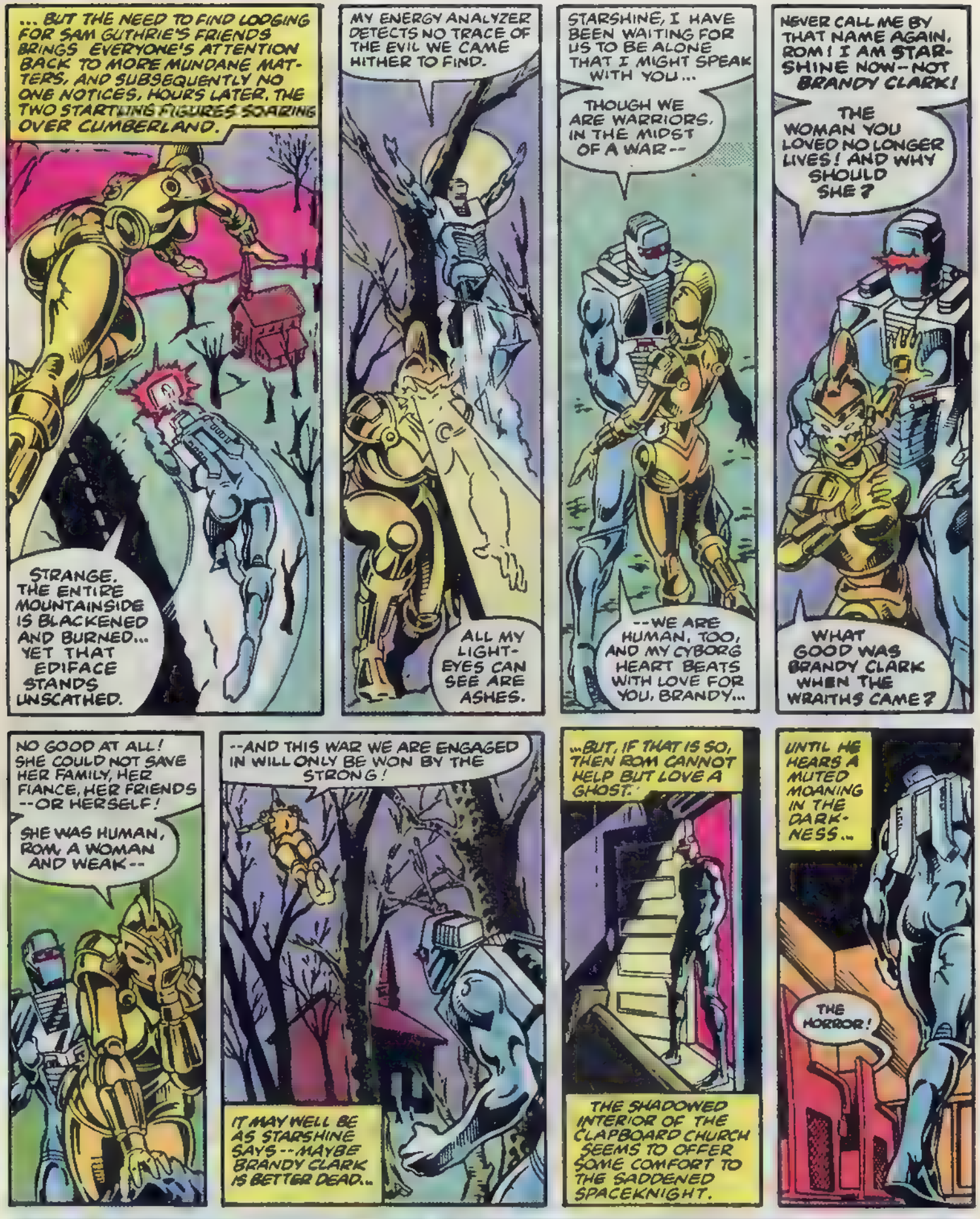


...HE SELF-CONSCIOUSLY EXTRICATES HIMSELF FROM HIS MOTHER'S EMBRACE, AND INTRODUCES HIS FRIENDS.






AND SO THE HOMECOMING GOES...
GEE, I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYONE WITH HAIR LIKE YOURS!
SAM GUTHRIE WAS BORN WITH MUTANT POWERS. THEY DID NOT MANIFEST THEMSELVES UNTIL HE WAS OLDER. WILL THE SAME PROVE TRUE OF ANY OF HIS SIBLINGS?
NAE, LASSIE, NO ONE WHO WALKS UPRIGHT!
MAMA, WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL DOES SAM GO TO, ANYWAY?
WHY, JUST A... A SPECIAL SCHOOL, JEDEDIAH.
BUT SPECIAL IN JUST WHAT WAY YOU MAY NEVER KNOW, MRS. GUTHRIE!
UH, ANYTHIN' ELSE T'EAT, ILLYANA?
SAM'S YOUNGER BROTHER JOSH KEEPS HOVERING, KIND OF MOONSTRUCK, AROUND AMARA AND I. WELL, HE IS CUTE... SORT OF.
I AM AMAZED, SAM, AT THE CALM THAT PREVAILED IN YOUR MOTHER'S HOUSE IN THE FACE OF THE FOREST FIRE.
FOLKS WHO LIVE HERE IN COAL COUNTRY HAVE LEARNED T'GO ON ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS DESPITE DISASTER, AMARA.
AND SAM SAYS SUCH DISASTERS ARE PLENTIFUL.
MINE CAVE-INS, MINERS TRAPPED, FIRES AND FLOODS--AND THE BLACK LUNG THAT KILLED SAM'S FATHER. LIFE WAS HARD BACK IN NOVA ROME, BUT NEVER LIKE THIS.
DID YOU SEE THE FIRE, RAHNE? GEE, I THOUGHT THE WHOLE TOWN WAS GONNA CATCH! IT WAS A MIRACLE HOW IT STOPPED!
A... MIRACLE?
YES, AND WE WERE THE MIRACLE-WORKERS, RIGHT, ILLYANA?
ROBERTO! SHHH!
WELL, I'M SURE THE NEW PREACHER WILL HAVE A SERMON OR TWO TO DELIVER ON THE SUBJECT OF THE FIRE AND MIRACLES.
NEW PREACHER, MAMA? WHAT'S HAPPENED TO REVEREND JOAD?
WHY, HE'S BEEN AILING LATELY, SAM.
GOT HIMSELF AN APPRENTICE T'HELP OUT AT THE CHURCH THESE DAYS. AN' SPEAKIN' OF MIRACLES, THE NEW PREACHER'S ONE HIMSELF!
HE WALKED OUT O' THE RIVER STARK NAKED -- COULDN'T EVEN TALK--AN' NOW HE SPOUTS SCRIPTURE LIKE HE KNEW IT ALL HIS LIFE!
ALL EYES TURN TOWARDS THE CHURCH ON THE HILL...


... BUT THE NEED TO FIND LODGING FOR SAM GUTHRIE'S FRIENDS BRINGS EVERYONE'S ATTENTION BACK TO MORE MUNDANE MATTERS, AND SUBSEQUENTLY NO ONE NOTICES, HOURS LATER, THE TWO STARTLING FIGURES SOARING OVER CUMBERLAND.
STRANGE. THE ENTIRE MOUNTAINSIDE IS BLACKENED AND BURNED... YET THAT EDIFACE STANDS UNSCATHED.
MY ENERGY ANALYZER DETECTS NO TRACE OF THE EVIL WE CAME HITHER TO FIND.
ALL MY LIGHT-EYES CAN SEE ARE ASHES.
STARSHINE, I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR US TO BE ALONE THAT I MIGHT SPEAK WITH YOU...
THOUGH WE ARE WARRIORS, IN THE MIDST OF A WAR--
--WE ARE HUMAN, TOO, AND MY CYBORG HEART BEATS WITH LOVE FOR YOU, BRANDY...
NEVER CALL ME BY THAT NAME AGAIN, ROM! I AM STARSHINE NOW--NOT BRANDY CLARK!
THE WOMAN YOU LOVED NO LONGER LIVES! AND WHY SHOULD SHE?
WHAT GOOD WAS BRANDY CLARK WHEN THE WRAITHS CAME?
NO GOOD AT ALL! SHE COULD NOT SAVE HER FAMILY, HER FIANCE, HER FRIENDS --OR HERSELF!
SHE WAS HUMAN, ROM, A WOMAN AND WEAK--
--AND THIS WAR WE ARE ENGAGED IN WILL ONLY BE WON BY THE STRONG!
IT MAY WELL BE AS STARSHINE SAYS--MAYBE BRANDY CLARK IS BETTER DEAD...
...BUT, IF THAT IS SO, THEN ROM CANNOT HELP BUT LOVE A GHOST.
THE SHADOWED INTERIOR OF THE CLAPBOARD CHURCH SEEMS TO OFFER SOME COMFORT TO THE SADDENED SPACEKNIGHT.
UNTIL HE HEARS A MUTED MOANING IN THE DARKNESS...
THE HORROR!
THE HORROR!
LOOKING INTO EYES WIDE WITH TERROR, ROM KNOWS THIS QUAKING ANCIENT HAS SEEN THE SPACEKNIGHT'S FOE.

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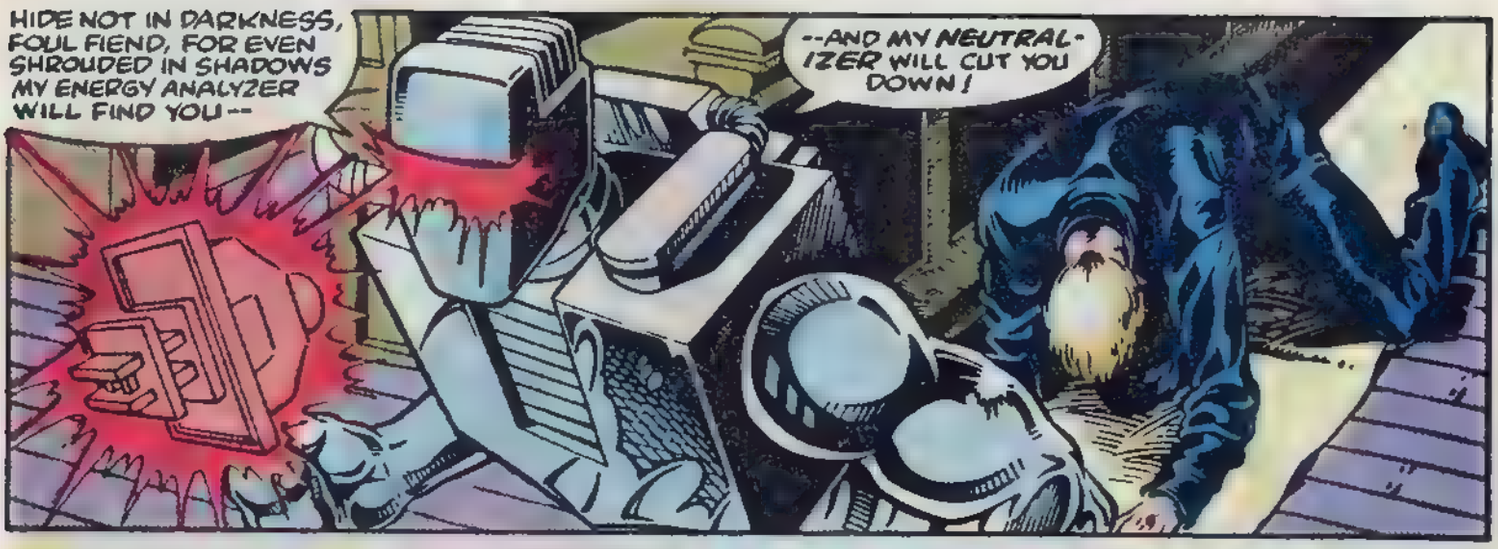
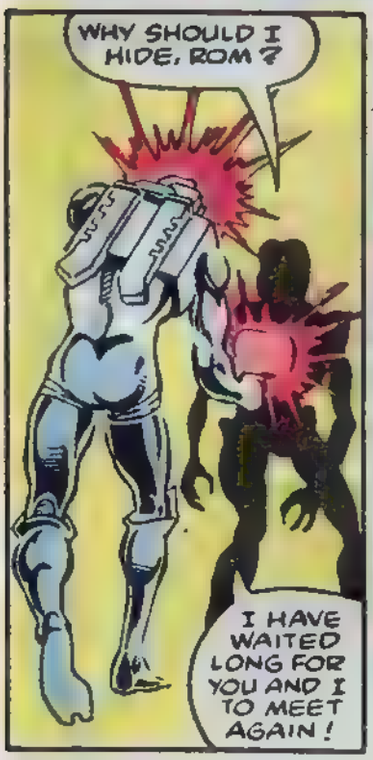
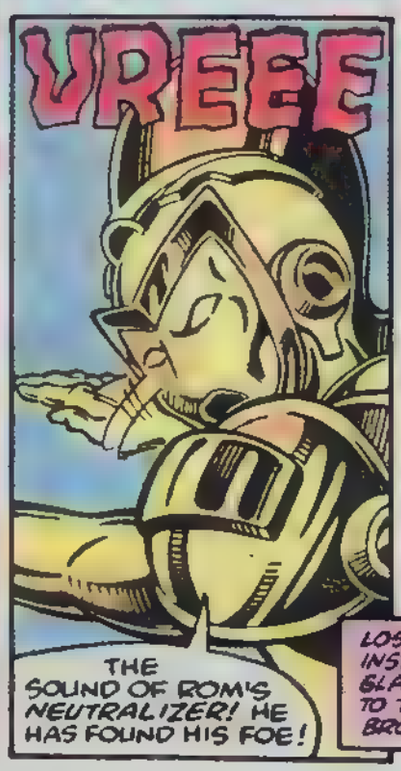
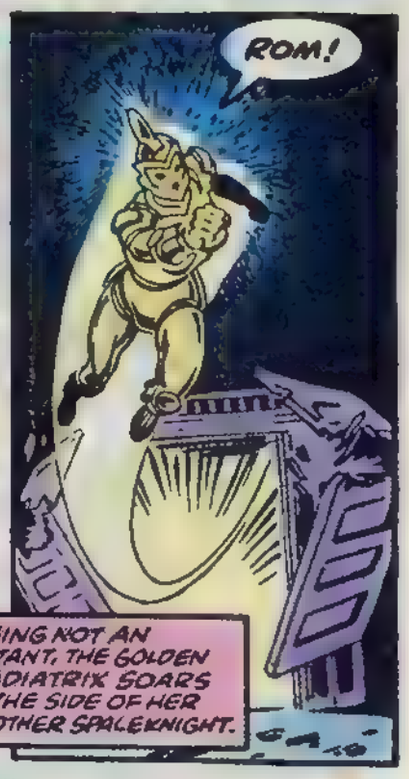

HIDE NOT IN DARKNESS, FOUL FIEND, FOR EVEN SHROUDED IN SHADOWS MY ENERGY ANALYZER WILL FIND YOU --
--AND MY NEUTRALIZER WILL CUT YOU DOWN!

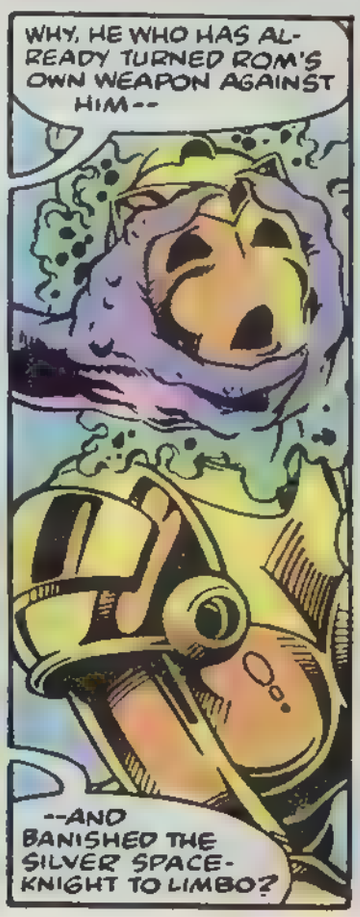

WHY SHOULD I HIDE, ROM?
I HAVE WAITED LONG FOR YOU AND I TO MEET AGAIN!

THE SLIGHTEST TOUCH FROM THE HELLISH HORROR'S MIND, AND ROM'S CYBORG ARMOR IS FROZEN.
HE CANNOT MOVE, BUT HE CAN UNLEASH THE POWER OF GALADOR'S GREATEST WEAPON!

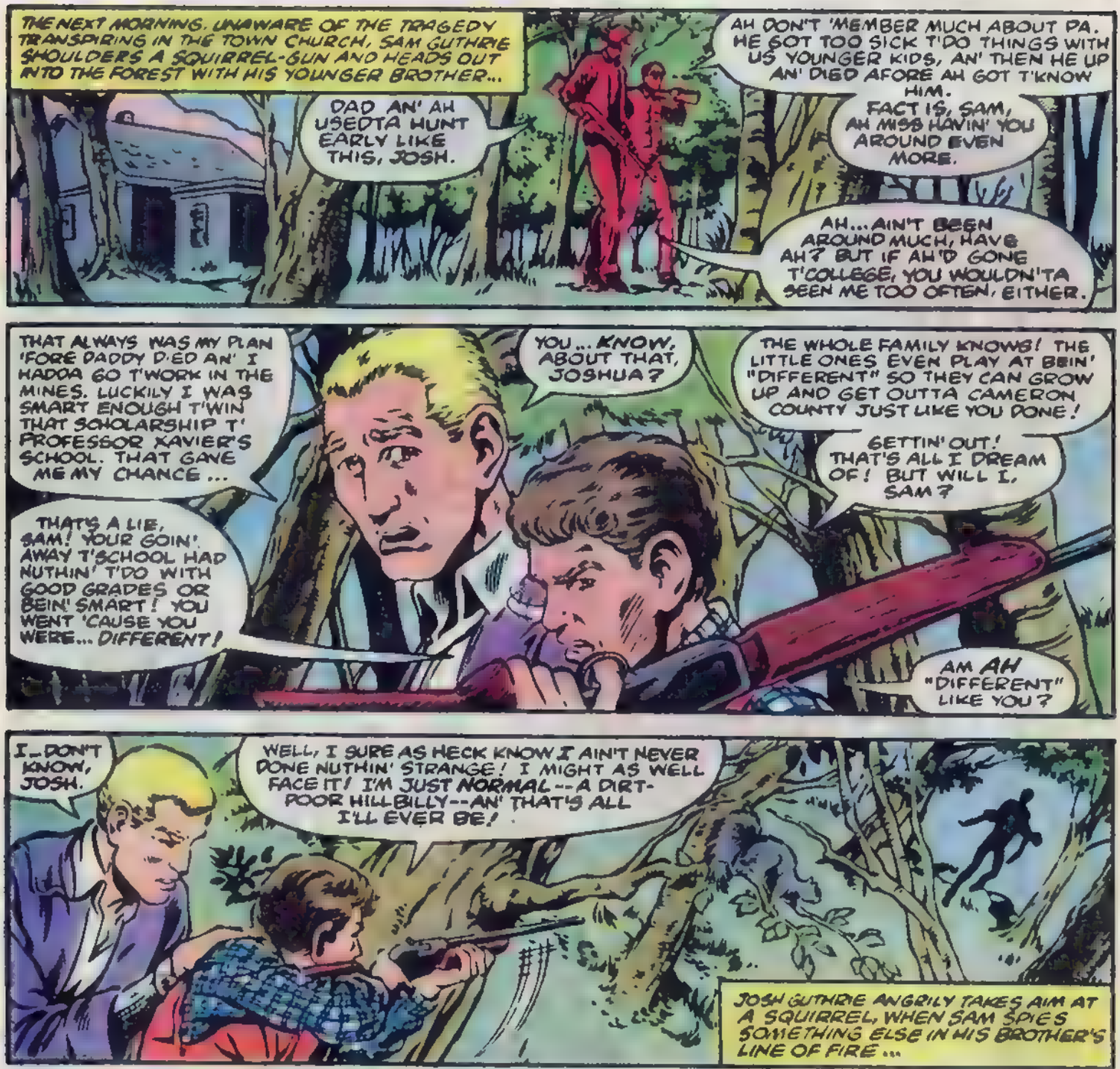

VREEE
THE SOUND OF ROM'S NEUTRALIZER! HE HAS FOUND HIS FOE!


ROM!
LOSING NOT AN INSTANT, THE GOLDEN GLADIATRIX SOARS TO THE SIDE OF HER BROTHER SPACEKNIGHT.

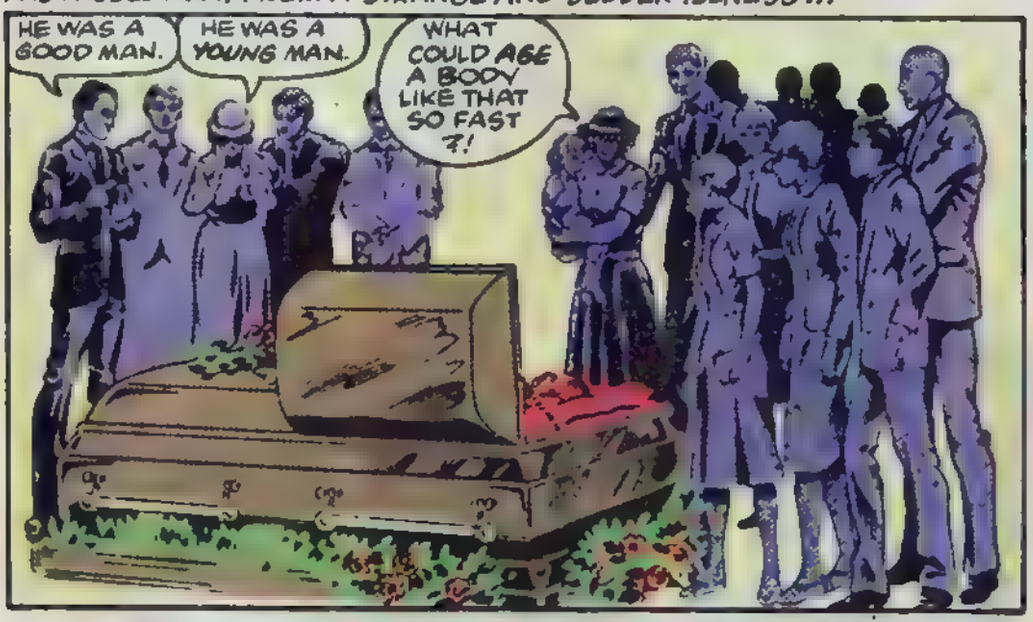
BUT THE FIRST SIGHT HER LIGHTEYES REGISTER IS THAT OF THE DYING PREACHER.
WHO HAS SLAIN YOU, OLD MAN?

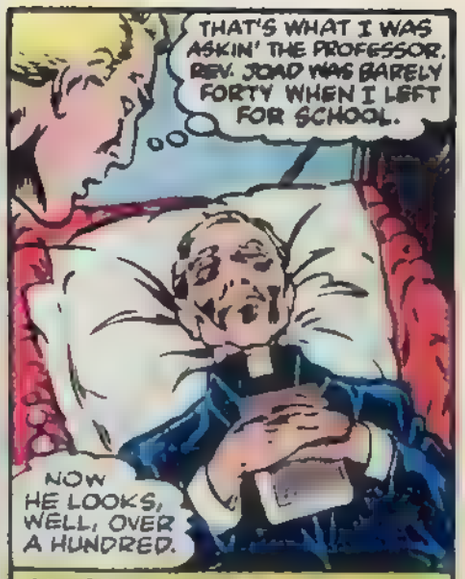

WHY, HE WHO HAS ALREADY TURNED ROM'S OWN WEAPON AGAINST HIM--
--AND BANISHED THE SILVER SPACEKNIGHT TO LIMBO?

SHALL I SLAY YOU AS WELL, MY PRETTY? NO, I BEGIN TO CONCEIVE A CRUELER TORMENT FOR MY MOST HATED ENEMY!
HIS THOUGHTS SCREAMING ACROSS THE VOID TELL ME HE LOVES YOU...
...THUS ROM SHALL WATCH HELPLESSLY AS I MAKE YOU THE MATE OF THE HORROR CALLED--HYBRID!
AS ROM BEFORE HER, STARSHINE FINDS HER ARMOR UNRESPONSIVE TO ANY THOUGHTS SAVE FOR THOSE OF THE MONSTER WHOSE MIND RULES ALL.

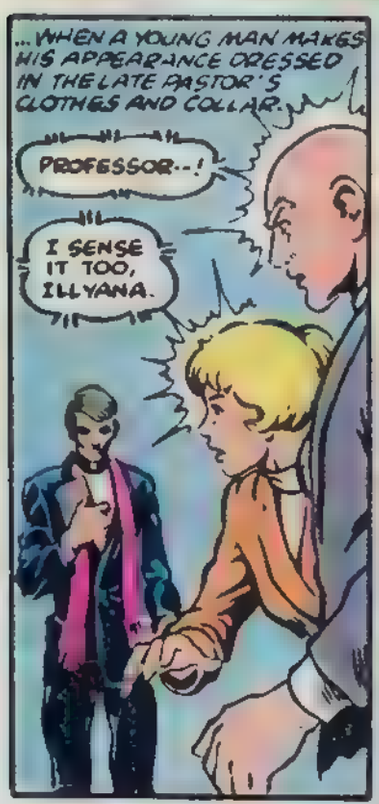

THE NEXT MORNING, UNAWARE OF THE TRAGEDY TRANSPIRING IN THE TOWN CHURCH, SAM GUTHRIE SHOULDERS A SQUIRREL-GUN AND HEADS OUT INTO THE FOREST WITH HIS YOUNGER BROTHER...
DAD AN' AH USEDTA HUNT EARLY LIKE THIS, JOSH.
AH DON'T 'MEMBER MUCH ABOUT PA. HE GOT TOO SICK T'DO THINGS WITH US YOUNGER KIDS, AN' THEN HE UP AN' DIED AFORE AH GOT T'KNOW HIM.
FACT IS, SAM, AH MISS HAVIN' YOU AROUND EVEN MORE.
AH... AIN'T BEEN AROUND MUCH, HAVE AH? BUT IF AH'D GONE T'COLLEGE, YOU WOULDN'TA SEEN ME TOO OFTEN, EITHER.
THAT ALWAYS WAS MY PLAN 'FORE DADDY D'ED AN' I HADDA GO T'WORK IN THE MINES. LUCKILY I WAS SMART ENOUGH T'WIN THAT SCHOLARSHIP T' PROFESSOR XAVIER'S SCHOOL. THAT GAVE ME MY CHANCE...
YOU... KNOW, ABOUT THAT, JOSHUA?
THE WHOLE FAMILY KNOWS! THE LITTLE ONES EVEN PLAY AT BEIN' "DIFFERENT" SO THEY CAN GROW UP AND GET OUTTA CAMERON COUNTY JUST LIKE YOU DONE!
GETTIN' OUT! THAT'S ALL I DREAM OF! BUT WILL I, SAM?
THAT'S A LIE, SAM! YOUR GOIN' AWAY T'SCHOOL HAD NUTHIN' T'DO WITH GOOD GRADES OR BEIN' SMART! YOU WENT 'CAUSE YOU WERE... DIFFERENT!
AM AH "DIFFERENT" LIKE YOU?
I-DON'T KNOW, JOSH.
WELL, I SURE AS HECK KNOW I AIN'T NEVER DONE NUTHIN' STRANGE! I MIGHT AS WELL FACE IT! I'M JUST NORMAL--A DIRT-POOR HILLBILLY--AN' THAT'S ALL I'LL EVER BE!
JOSH GUTHRIE ANGRILY TAKES AIM AT A SQUIRREL, WHEN SAM SPIES SOMETHING ELSE IN HIS BROTHER'S LINE OF FIRE...
JOSH, NO!
BWOOM
SAM, WHAT IN BLAZES..?!
SORRY, LITTLE BROTHER..
--BUT YOU ALMOST SHOT MORE'N A SQUIRREL.
BUT THE FIGURE, CARRYING ANOTHER OUT OF THE TREES AND DOWN THE SLOPES, CONTINUES ON AS IF NO SHOTS WERE FIRED.
SAM WONDERS IF HIS EYES DECEIVE HIM--HE COULD SWEAR THE FIGURE IS WALKING ON AIR!
BUT EVERYONE KNOWS YOU SHOULDN'T SWEAR...ESPECIALLY IN THE PRESENCE OF CUMBERLAND'S NEW PREACHER!

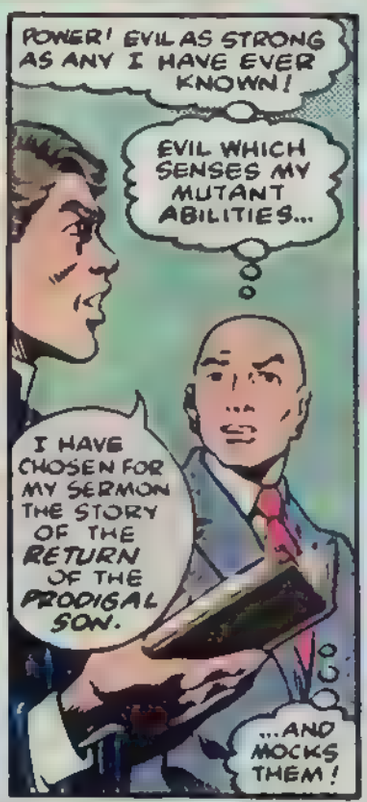
SOON ALL OF CAMERON COUNTY KNOWS THAT THEIR BELOVED REVEREND JOAD HAS PASSED AWAY FROM A STRANGE AND SUDDEN ILLNESS...

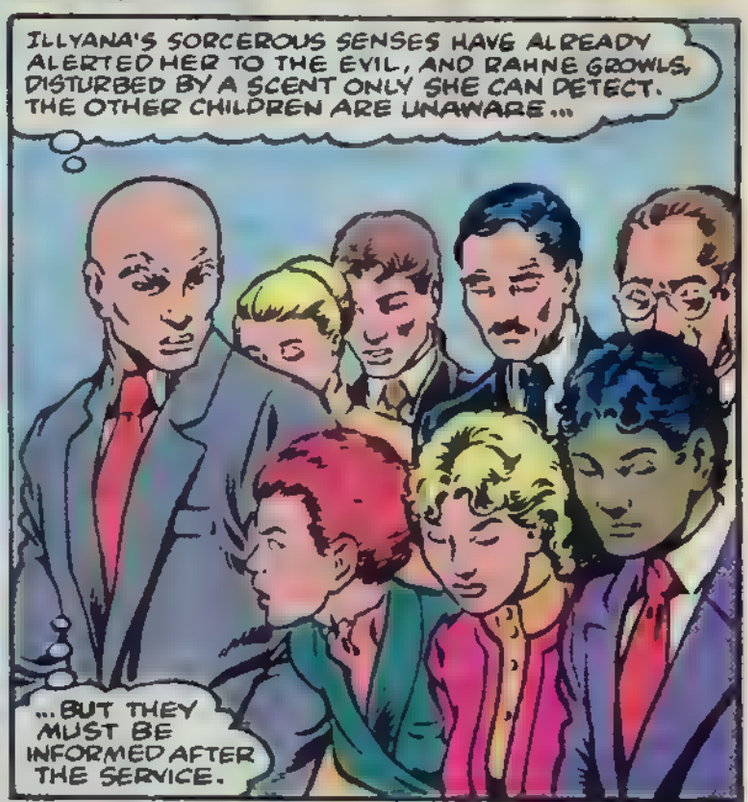


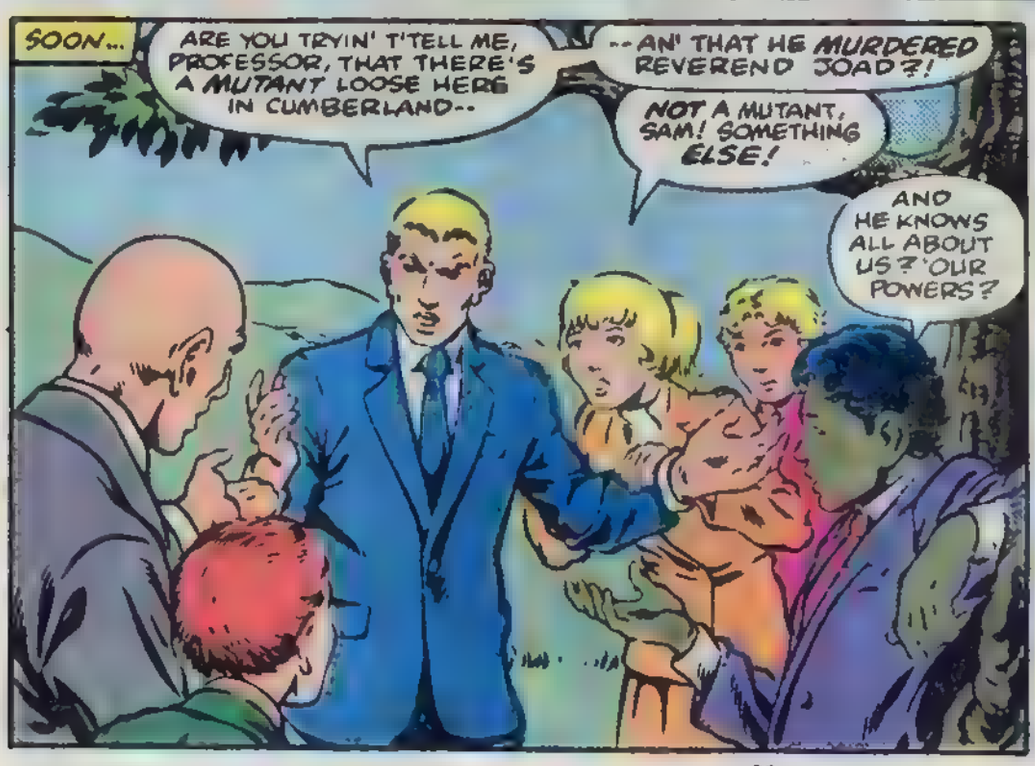


SOMEONE IN THE CROWD ASKS WHO WILL PRESIDE OVER THE PREACHER'S FUNERAL...

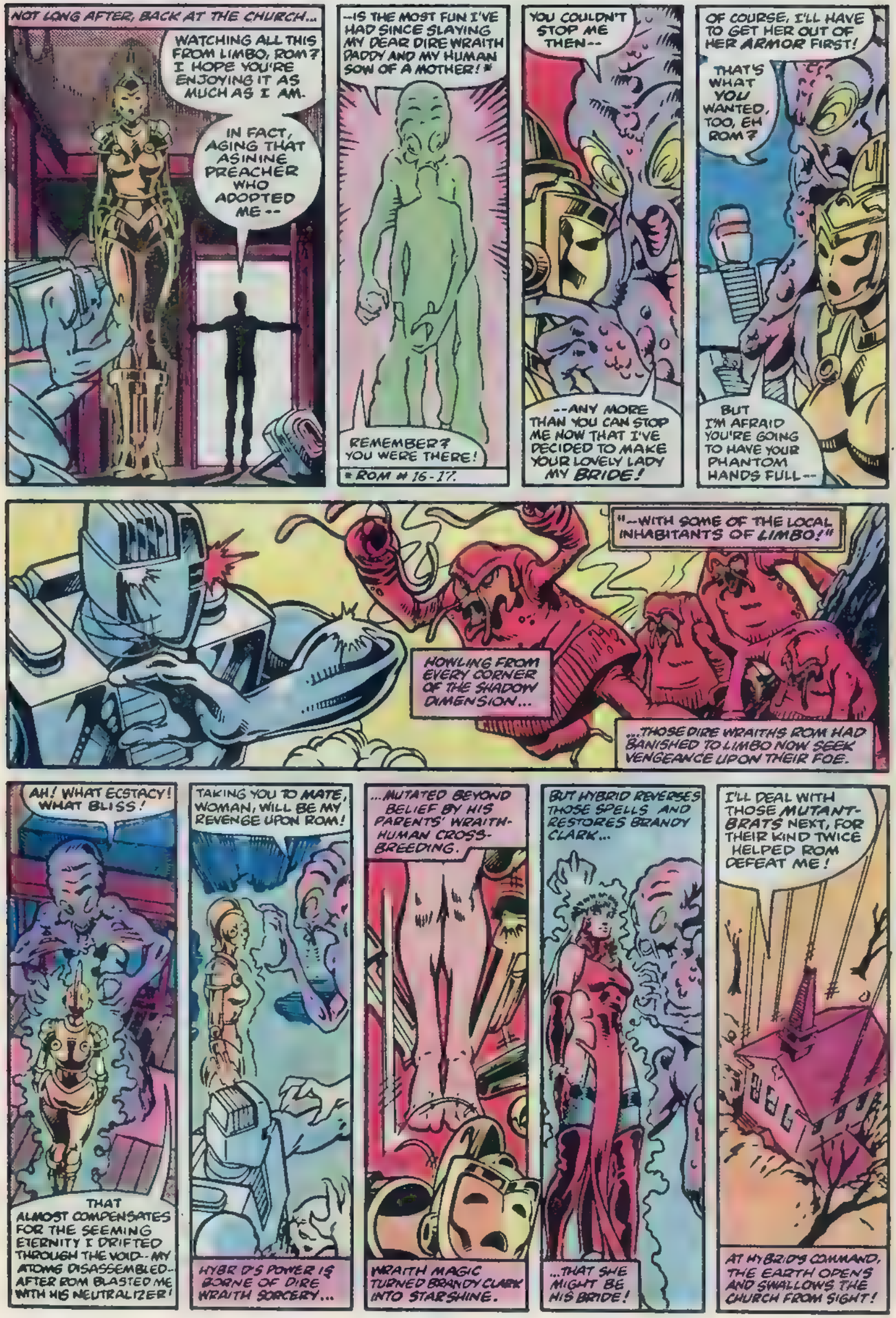








OUT OF EARSHOT, THE YOUNG PREACHER MONITORS EVERY THOUGHT THAT GIVES RISE TO THE NEW MUTANTS' WORDS -- WHILE SHIELDING HIS OWN THOUGHTS -- AND HE SMILES.


NOT LONG AFTER, BACK AT THE CHURCH...
WATCHING ALL THIS FROM LIMBO, ROM? I HOPE YOU'RE ENJOYING IT AS MUCH AS I AM.
IN FACT, AGING THAT ASININE PREACHER WHO ADOPTED ME --
--IS THE MOST FUN I'VE HAD SINCE SLAYING MY DEAR DIRE WRAITH DADDY AND MY HUMAN SOW OF A MOTHER! *
REMEMBER? YOU WERE THERE!
* ROM # 16-17.
YOU COULDN'T STOP ME THEN--
--ANY MORE THAN YOU CAN STOP ME NOW THAT I'VE DECIDED TO MAKE YOUR LOVELY LADY MY BRIDE!
OF COURSE, I'LL HAVE TO GET HER OUT OF HER ARMOR FIRST!
THAT'S WHAT YOU WANTED, TOO, EH ROM?
BUT I'M AFRAID YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE YOUR PHANTOM HANDS FULL--
"--WITH SOME OF THE LOCAL INHABITANTS OF LIMBO!"
HOWLING FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE SHADOW DIMENSION...
...THOSE DIRE WRAITHS ROM HAD BANISHED TO LIMBO NOW SEEK VENGEANCE UPON THEIR FOE.
AH! WHAT ECSTACY! WHAT BLISS!
THAT ALMOST COMPENSATES FOR THE SEEMING ETERNITY I DRIFTED THROUGH THE VOID--MY ATOMS DISASSEMBLED-AFTER ROM BLASTED ME WITH HIS NEUTRALIZER!
TAKING YOU TO MATE, WOMAN, WILL BE MY REVENGE UPON ROM!
HYBRID'S POWER IS BORNE OF DIRE WRAITH SORCERY...
...MUTATED BEYOND BELIEF BY HIS PARENTS' WRAITH-HUMAN CROSS-BREEDING.
WRAITH MAGIC TURNED BRANDY CLARK INTO STARSHINE.
BUT HYBRID REVERSES THOSE SPELLS AND RESTORES BRANDY CLARK...
...THAT SHE MIGHT BE HIS BRIDE!
I'LL DEAL WITH THOSE MUTANT-BRATS NEXT, FOR THEIR KIND TWICE HELPED ROM DEFEAT ME!
AT HYBRID'S COMMAND, THE EARTH OPENS AND SWALLOWS THE CHURCH FROM SIGHT!

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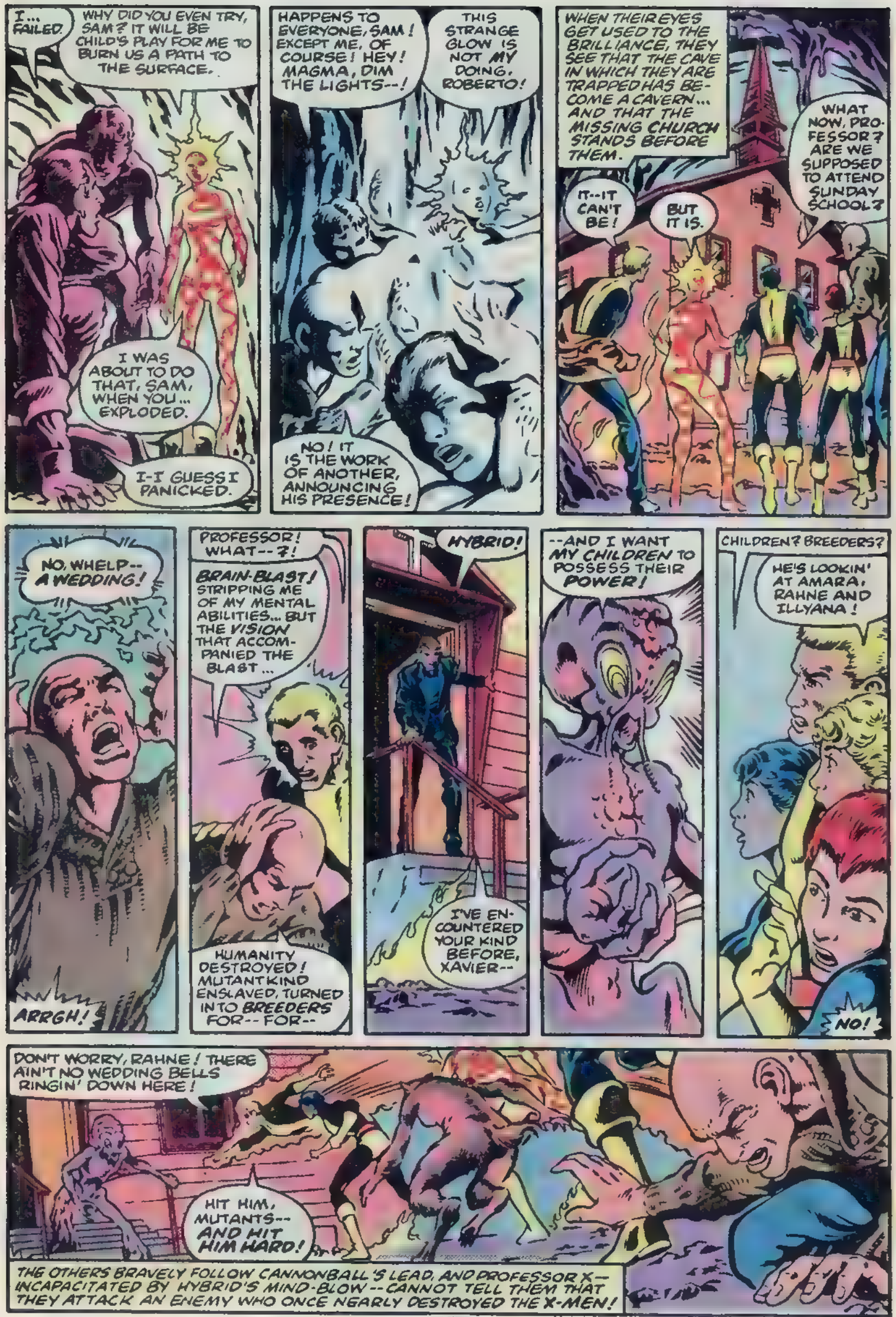
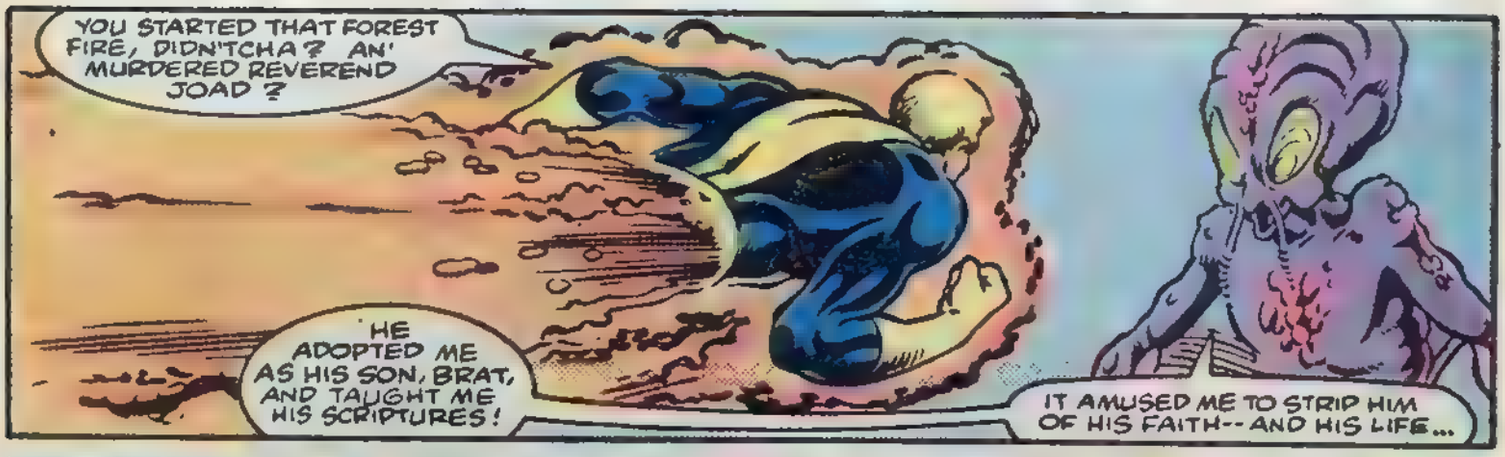
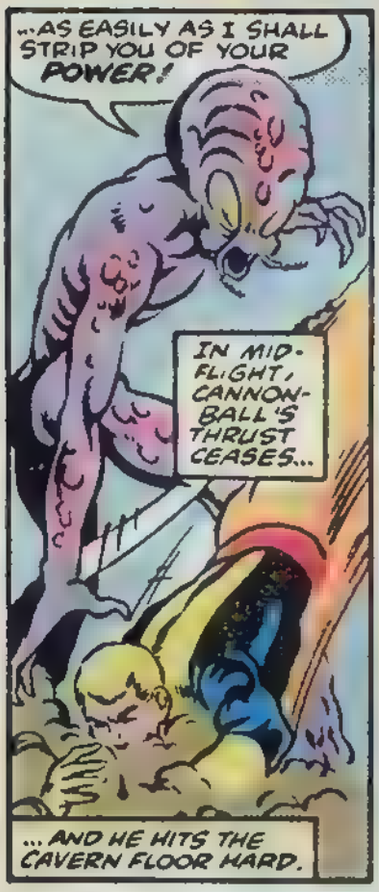
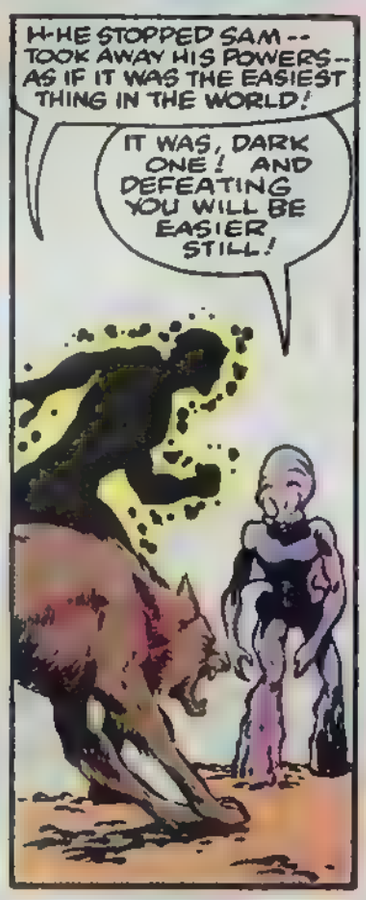
WITHIN THE HOUR, WORD OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE OLD CHURCH STUNS A TOWN ALREADY GRIEVING OVER THEIR PREACHER'S DEATH...
THE EVIL I SENSED IS RESPONSIBLE, BUT THESE TOWNSPEOPLE MUST NOT KNOW THAT.
MINING THESE HILLS HAS CAUSED FAULTS UNDER-GROUND.
SURE! ONE MUST'VE OPENED AN' THE CHURCH FELL IN!
SURE! THAT'S RIGHT!
USING HIS PSI POWERS TO HIDE THE MUTANTS' PRESENCE FROM THE MINERS, XAVIER LEADS HIS STUDENTS INTO THE MINES...
YOU LIED TO MY NEIGHBORS ABOUT THE CHURCH DISAPPEARIN', PROFESSOR!
I KNOW THAT, SAM, AND I AM SORRY.
BUT NECESSITY FORCED MY HAND.
ALONG WITH THEIR MENTOR, THE TREPIDATIOUS TEENAGERS DELVE DOWN INTO THE DARK TUNNELS.
...EACH ALONE WITH HIS OR HER THOUGHTS.
THESE MINES KILLED MY DADDY, AND WOULD'VE KILLED ME IF AH HADN'T BEEN... DIFFERENT!
WHAT'LL THEY DO TO THE REST OF MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS?
THIS DESCENT INTO DARKNESS CHILLS ME TO MY SOUL--
--EVEN THOUGH I KNOW NO MERE TUNNEL MADE BY MAN CAN CARRY ME BACK TO THE HELL THAT IS BELASCO'S LIMBO!
I FEEL LIKE AN ANIMAL, TRAPPED IN A CAGE!
MY MUTANT POWERS FLOW FROM MOTHER EARTH--
--AND I SENSE HER PRESENCE ALL ABOUT ME!
DARKNESS! HOW LONG CAN I SURVIVE DOWN HERE WITHOUT EXPOSURE TO THE SUN WHICH REVITALIZES ME AND GIVES ME POWER!
IT WAS IN A FORTRESS, DARK AND DANK AS THIS.. BATTLING AN ALIEN NAMED LUCIFER--THAT I LOST THE USE OF MY LEGS. I HAVE RECOVERED--
--BUT THE OLD FEARS DIE HARD.
SUDDENLY, BEHIND THE NEW MUTANTS...
...APPEARS HYBRID, IN HIS GUISE AS THE YOUNG PREACHER.
AH! MY WEDDING ENTOURAGE ARRIVES!
MY BEST MEN... AND THE REST OF MY BRIDES!

AND, WITH BUT A THOUGHT, HYBRID TRIGGERS...
A CAVE-IN!
AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE SHAFT, MINERS RACE FOR SAFETY...
RUMMBLE!
SHAFT'S SEALED!
ANYONE IN THERE?
WHY, NO... NO, I DON'T THINK SO!
WHAT PROFESSOR X DID NOT ALLOW THE MINERS TO KNOW, THEY CANNOT REMEMBER...
...AND SO THE NEW MUTANTS LIE ALONE AND FORGOTTEN IN THE DARKNESS.
WE SHOULD HEAR RESCUE WORKERS DIGGIN' FOR US SOON!
NO, SAM. NO ONE KNOWS WE'RE HERE... SAVE HE WHO CAUSED THE CAVE-IN... AND HE'S KEEPING ME FROM GETTING OUT PSIONICALLY
THEN WE'RE BEATEN BEFORE WE'VE EVEN ENCOUNTERED THE EVIL, PROFESSOR?
BEATEN AND DOOMED, GIRL! I'VE KNOWN MEN WHO DIED IN THESE MINES!
CHOKIN' ON DUST! GAS SEEPIN' THROUGH COAL! DYIN' IN DARKNESS!
AMARA, GIVE US LIGHT!
SAM, DON'T PANIC!
OF COURSE, 'BERTO!
AMARA'S FLAME WILL SOON DEPLETE THE OXYGEN IN THIS CAVE.
ARE... ARE WE TO DIE, THEN, PROFESSOR?
NO!!!
IF SAM GUTHRIE FEARS ANYTHING, IT IS DYING DEEP DOWN IN THE DARKNESS OF A COAL MINE.
AND THAT IS SOMETHING CANNONBALL REFUSES TO DO!
SHROOM
THE ROAR OF HIS LAUNCHING DEAFENS THE OTHERS.
HE DRIVES UPWARD THROUGH SOLID ROCK.
ONE HUNDRED FEET. TWO HUNDRED.
BUT THEY HAD DESCENDED MILES DOWN INTO THE EARTH.
I-I'M SLOWING! STOPPING! I CAN'T GO ANY FARTHER!
THUD


I... FAILED.
WHY DID YOU EVEN TRY, SAM? IT WILL BE CHILD'S PLAY FOR ME TO BURN US A PATH TO THE SURFACE.
I WAS ABOUT TO DO THAT, SAM, WHEN YOU... EXPLODED.
I-I GUESS I PANICKED.
HAPPENS TO EVERYONE, SAM! EXCEPT ME, OF COURSE! HEY! MAGMA, DIM THE LIGHTS--!
THIS STRANGE GLOW IS NOT MY DOING, ROBERTO!
NO! IT IS THE WORK OF ANOTHER, ANNOUNCING HIS PRESENCE!
WHEN THEIR EYES GET USED TO THE BRILLIANCE, THEY SEE THAT THE CAVE IN WHICH THEY ARE TRAPPED HAS BECOME A CAVERN... AND THAT THE MISSING CHURCH STANDS BEFORE THEM.
WHAT NOW, PROFESSOR? ARE WE SUPPOSED TO ATTEND SUNDAY SCHOOL?
IT--IT CAN'T BE!
BUT IT IS.
NO, WHELP-- A WEDDING!
ARRGH!
PROFESSOR! WHAT--?!
BRAIN-BLAST! STRIPPING ME OF MY MENTAL ABILITIES... BUT THE VISION THAT ACCOMPANIED THE BLAST...
HUMANITY DESTROYED! MUTANTKIND ENSLAVED, TURNED INTO BREEDERS FOR-- FOR--
HYBRID!
I'VE ENCOUNTERED YOUR KIND BEFORE, XAVIER--
--AND I WANT MY CHILDREN TO POSSESS THEIR POWER!
CHILDREN? BREEDERS?
HE'S LOOKIN' AT AMARA, RAHNE AND ILLYANA!
NO!
DON'T WORRY, RAHNE! THERE AIN'T NO WEDDING BELLS RINGIN' DOWN HERE!
HIT HIM, MUTANTS-- AND HIT HIM HARD!
THE OTHERS BRAVELY FOLLOW CANNONBALL'S LEAD, AND PROFESSOR X-- INCAPACITATED BY HYBRID'S MIND-BLOW -- CANNOT TELL THEM THAT THEY ATTACK AN ENEMY WHO ONCE NEARLY DESTROYED THE X-MEN!


YOU STARTED THAT FOREST FIRE, DIDN'TCHA? AN' MURDERED REVEREND JOAD?
HE ADOPTED ME AS HIS SON, BRAT, AND TAUGHT ME HIS SCRIPTURES!
IT AMUSED ME TO STRIP HIM OF HIS FAITH--AND HIS LIFE...

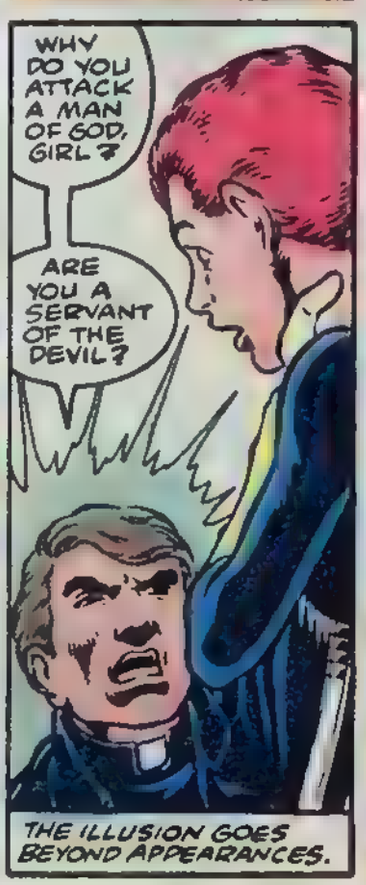

...AS EASILY AS I SHALL STRIP YOU OF YOUR POWER!
IN MID-FLIGHT, CANNON-BALL'S THRUST CEASES...
...AND HE HITS THE CAVERN FLOOR HARD.

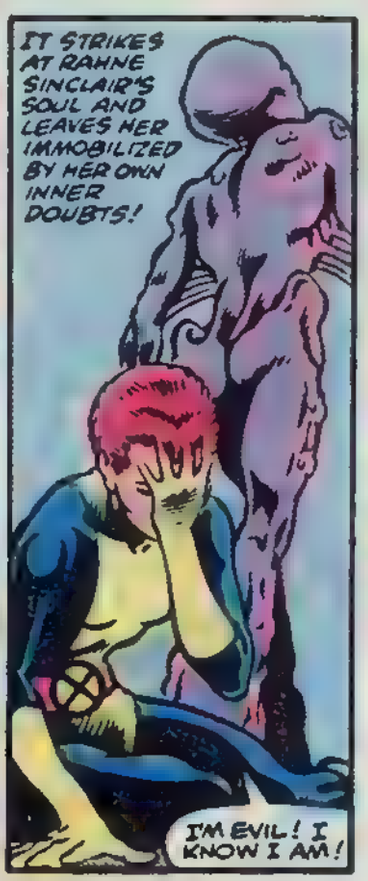

H-HE STOPPED SAM--TOOK AWAY HIS POWERS--AS IF IT WAS THE EASIEST THING IN THE WORLD!
IT WAS, DARK ONE! AND DEFEATING YOU WILL BE EASIER STILL!

NO! ROCK FROM THE CAVERN FLOOR RISING UP, ENCASING ME--!
UNABLE TO FREE SUN-SPOT, WOLFSBANE HOWLS...

...AND HURLS HERSELF UPON HIS ATTACKER.
AWROOO
YES, LEAP TO ME, GIRL--

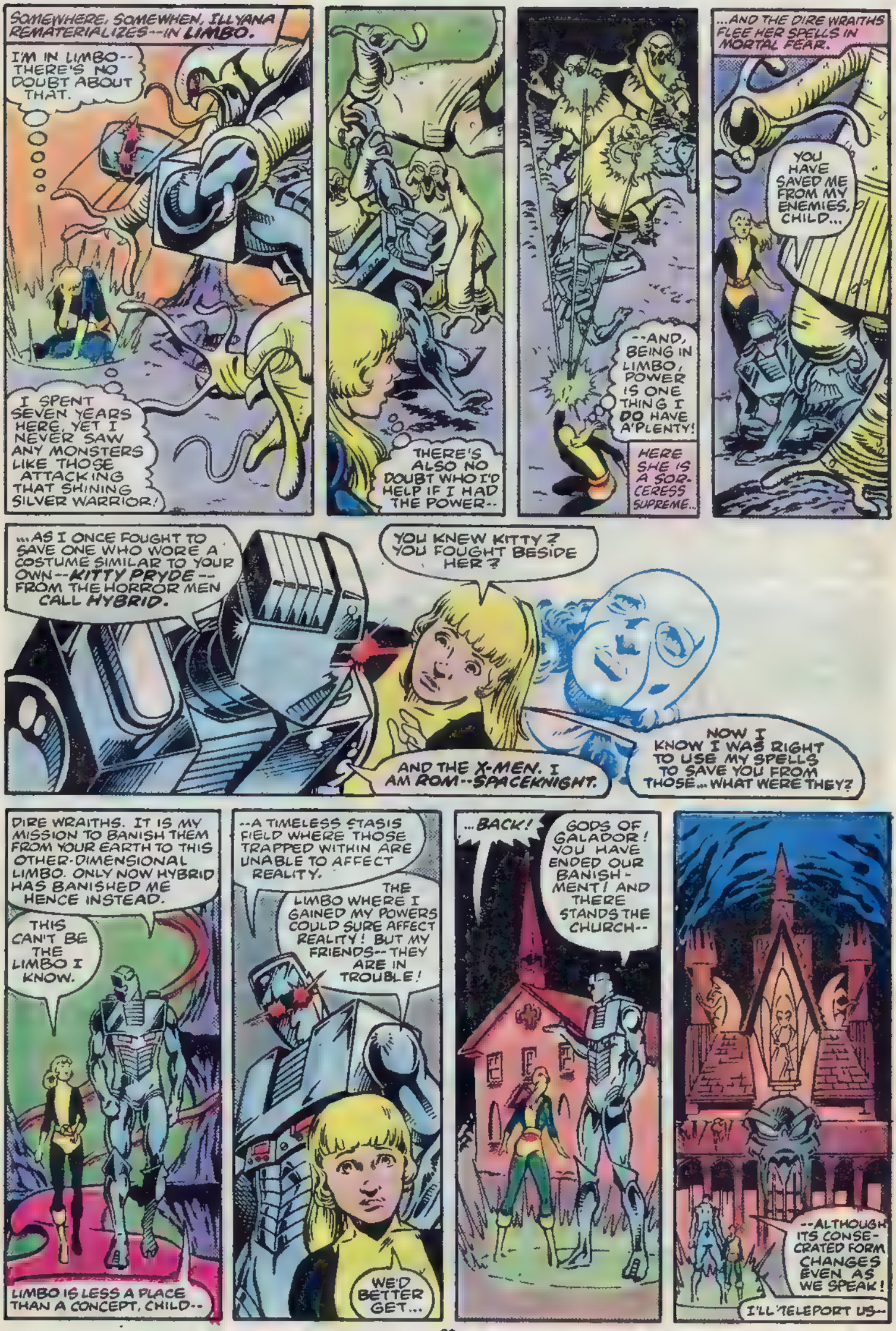
--FOR IT IS THE WOMEN I WANT!
N-NOOO!


WHY DO YOU ATTACK A MAN OF GOD, GIRL?
ARE YOU A SERVANT OF THE DEVIL?
THE ILLUSION GOES BEYOND APPEARANCES.


IT STRIKES AT RAHNE SINCLAIR'S SOUL AND LEAVES HER IMMOBILIZED BY HER OWN INNER DOUBTS!
I'M EVIL! I KNOW I AM!

YOU HAVE NO DOUBTS, EH, GIRL? YOU LIKE WHAT YOU ARE!
I LIKE HAVING THE POWER TO INCINERATE AN ABOMINATION LIKE YOU!

BUT IT'S NOT ME YOU SHALL BURN, MY BEAUTY! IT IS YOUR FRIEND!
BOBBY!
HYBRID'S SEIZED CONTROL OF MAGMA'S POWER, CAUSING HER TO DRIVE LAVA AGAINST THE STONE COFFIN ENCASING SUN-SPOT! I'VE GOT TO STOP HIM... BUT HOW?!
YOU COULD ASK ME NICELY, ILLYANA...
...OR YOU COULD WOO MY FAVORS WITH A KISS!
NEVER!
WHYEVER NOT, SORCERESS? WHAT A MATCH WE WOULD MAKE! EVIL TO EVIL!
NO!
ILLYANA'S REVULSION SUMMONS A TELE-PORT CIRCLE, AND...
SHE IS GONE!
NO MATTER! I STILL HAVE THE OTHERS!
COME, THEN, MY PRETTY PETS! FOLLOW ME INTO THE CHURCH, AND THERE WITNESS THE TAKING OF MY BRIDE!


SOMEWHERE, SOMEWHEN, ILLYANA REMATERIALIZES--IN LIMBO.
I'M IN LIMBO--THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT.
I SPENT SEVEN YEARS HERE, YET I NEVER SAW ANY MONSTERS LIKE THOSE ATTACKING THAT SHINING SILVER WARRIOR!
THERE'S ALSO NO DOUBT WHO I'D HELP IF I HAD THE POWER--
--AND, BEING IN LIMBO, POWER IS ONE THING I DO HAVE A'PLENTY!
HERE SHE IS A SORCERESS SUPREME...
...AND THE DIRE WRAITHS FLEE HER SPELLS IN MORTAL FEAR.
YOU HAVE SAVED ME FROM MY ENEMIES, CHILD...
...AS I ONCE FOUGHT TO SAVE ONE WHO WORE A COSTUME SIMILAR TO YOUR OWN--KITTY PRYDE--FROM THE HORROR MEN CALL HYBRID.
YOU KNEW KITTY? YOU FOUGHT BESIDE HER?
AND THE X-MEN. I AM ROM--SPACEKNIGHT.
NOW I KNOW I WAS RIGHT TO USE MY SPELLS TO SAVE YOU FROM THOSE... WHAT WERE THEY?
DIRE WRAITHS. IT IS MY MISSION TO BANISH THEM FROM YOUR EARTH TO THIS OTHER-DIMENSIONAL LIMBO. ONLY NOW HYBRID HAS BANISHED ME HENCE INSTEAD.
THIS CAN'T BE THE LIMBO I KNOW.
LIMBO IS LESS A PLACE THAN A CONCEPT, CHILD--
--A TIMELESS STASIS FIELD WHERE THOSE TRAPPED WITHIN ARE UNABLE TO AFFECT REALITY.
THE LIMBO WHERE I GAINED MY POWERS COULD SURE AFFECT REALITY! BUT MY FRIENDS--THEY ARE IN TROUBLE!
WE'D BETTER GET...
...BACK!
GODS OF GALADOR! YOU HAVE ENDED OUR BANISHMENT! AND THERE STANDS THE CHURCH--
--ALTHOUGH ITS CONSECRATED FORM CHANGES EVEN AS WE SPEAK!
I'LL TELEPORT US--

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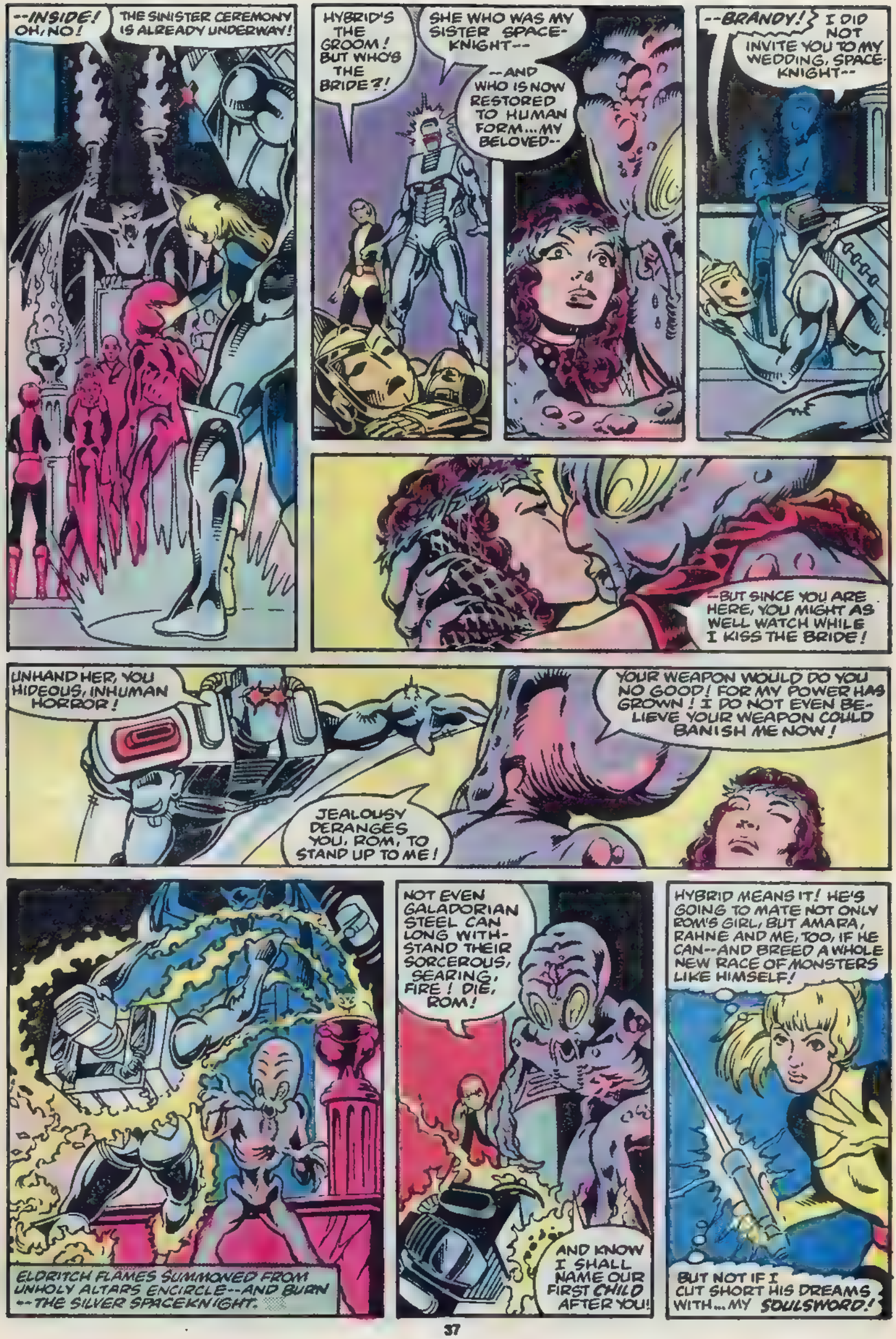
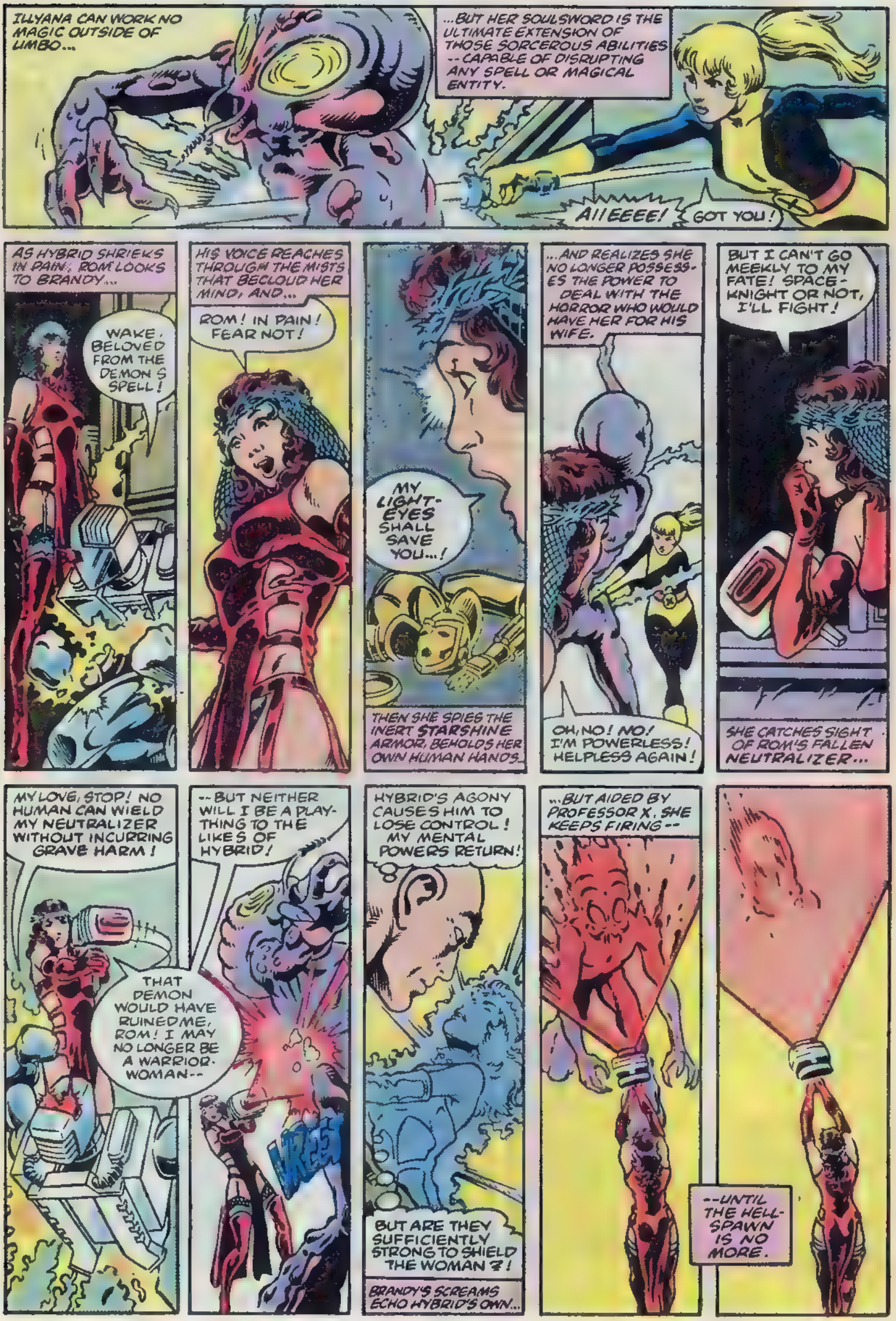
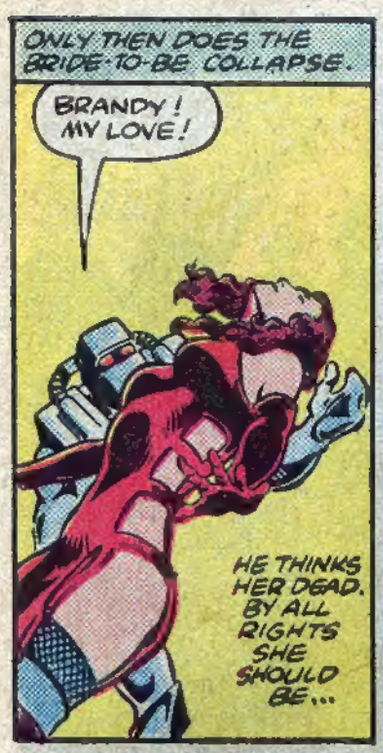
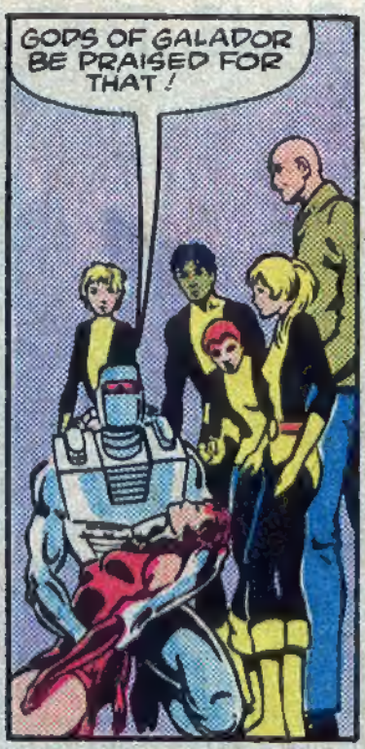

--INSIDE! OH, NO!
THE SINISTER CEREMONY IS ALREADY UNDERWAY!
HYBRID'S THE GROOM! BUT WHO'S THE BRIDE?!
SHE WHO WAS MY SISTER SPACE-KNIGHT--
--AND WHO IS NOW RESTORED TO HUMAN FORM... MY BELOVED--
--BRANDY! I DID NOT INVITE YOU TO MY WEDDING, SPACE-KNIGHT--
--BUT SINCE YOU ARE HERE, YOU MIGHT AS WELL WATCH WHILE I KISS THE BRIDE!
UNHAND HER, YOU HIDEOUS, INHUMAN HORROR!
YOUR WEAPON WOULD DO YOU NO GOOD! FOR MY POWER HAS GROWN! I DO NOT EVEN BELIEVE YOUR WEAPON COULD BANISH ME NOW!
JEALOUSY DERANGES YOU, ROM, TO STAND UP TO ME!
ELDRITCH FLAMES SUMMONED FROM UNHOLY ALTARS ENCIRCLE--AND BURN --THE SILVER SPACEKNIGHT.
NOT EVEN GALADORIAN STEEL CAN LONG WITHSTAND THEIR SORCEROUS, SEARING, FIRE! DIE, ROM!
AND KNOW I SHALL NAME OUR FIRST CHILD AFTER YOU!
HYBRID MEANS IT! HE'S GOING TO MATE NOT ONLY ROM'S GIRL, BUT AMARA, RAHNE AND ME, TOO, IF HE CAN--AND BREED A WHOLE NEW RACE OF MONSTERS LIKE HIMSELF!
BUT NOT IF I CUT SHORT HIS DREAMS WITH... MY SOULSWORD!

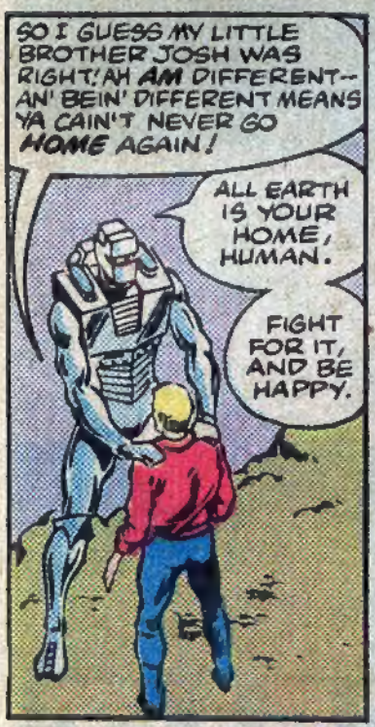

ILLYANA CAN WORK NO MAGIC OUTSIDE OF LIMBO...
...BUT HER SOULSWORD IS THE ULTIMATE EXTENSION OF THOSE SORCEROUS ABILITIES -- CAPABLE OF DISRUPTING ANY SPELL OR MAGICAL ENTITY.
AIIEEEE!
GOT YOU!
AS HYBRID SHRIEKS IN PAIN, ROM LOOKS TO BRANDY...
WAKE, BELOVED FROM THE DEMON'S SPELL!
HIS VOICE REACHES THROUGH THE MISTS THAT BECLOUD HER MIND, AND...
ROM! IN PAIN! FEAR NOT!
MY LIGHT-EYES SHALL SAVE YOU...!
THEN SHE SPIES THE INERT STARSHINE ARMOR, BEHOLDS HER OWN HUMAN HANDS.
...AND REALIZES SHE NO LONGER POSSESSES THE POWER TO DEAL WITH THE HORROR WHO WOULD HAVE HER FOR HIS WIFE.
OH, NO! NO! I'M POWERLESS! HELPLESS AGAIN!
BUT I CAN'T GO MEEKLY TO MY FATE! SPACE-KNIGHT OR NOT, I'LL FIGHT!
SHE CATCHES SIGHT OF ROM'S FALLEN NEUTRALIZER...
MY LOVE, STOP! NO HUMAN CAN WIELD MY NEUTRALIZER WITHOUT INCURRING GRAVE HARM!
THAT DEMON WOULD HAVE RUINED ME, ROM! I MAY NO LONGER BE A WARRIOR-WOMAN--
--BUT NEITHER WILL I BE A PLAYTHING TO THE LIKES OF HYBRID!
SKREEE
HYBRID'S AGONY CAUSES HIM TO LOSE CONTROL! MY MENTAL POWERS RETURN!
BUT ARE THEY SUFFICIENTLY STRONG TO SHIELD THE WOMAN?!
BRANDY'S SCREAMS ECHO HYBRID'S OWN...
...BUT AIDED BY PROFESSOR X, SHE KEEPS FIRING--
--UNTIL THE HELL-SPAWN IS NO MORE.


ONLY THEN DOES THE BRIDE-TO-BE COLLAPSE.
BRANDY! MY LOVE!
HE THINKS HER DEAD. BY ALL RIGHTS SHE SHOULD BE...

...BUT XAVIER SHARED HER PAIN, AND THUS BRANDY CLARK LIVES.
BUT...NOW I...CAN-NOT... FIGHT BY YOUR SIDE...BE-LOVED!

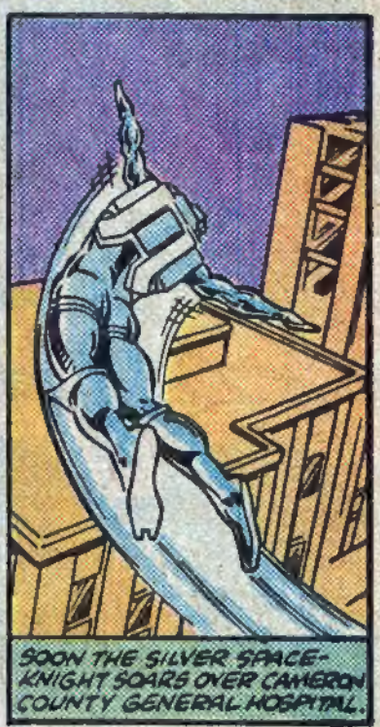

GODS OF GALADOR BE PRAISED FOR THAT!

LATER...
THE CHURCH IS GONE, BUT THE TOWN'S SAFE!
NOT THAT WE COULD EVER TELL THE FOLKS WHO LIVE HERE WHAT HAPPENED!

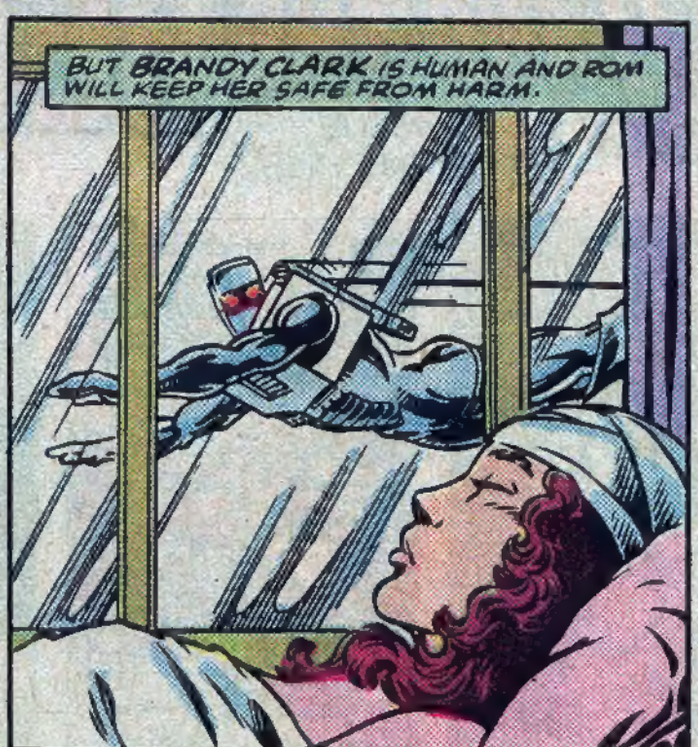

SO I GUESS MY LITTLE BROTHER JOSH WAS RIGHT! AH AM DIFFERENT--AN' BEIN' DIFFERENT MEANS YA CAIN'T NEVER GO HOME AGAIN!
ALL EARTH IS YOUR HOME, HUMAN.
FIGHT FOR IT, AND BE HAPPY.

FOR YOU NEVER KNOW HOW GOOD YOUR HOME IS... UNTIL YOU LOSE IT!

WHERE'S ROM GOING, PROFESSOR?
NOT HOME, RAHNE, NOT YET. BUT AWAY--
--TO LAY CLAIM TO A LITTLE HAPPINESS OF HIS OWN.


SOON THE SILVER SPACE-KNIGHT SOARS OVER CAMERON COUNTY GENERAL HOSPITAL.

THERE HIS LADY LIES, DRAWN AND EXHAUST-ED FROM HER TRANS-FORMATION...
...SUNK INTO A DEEP AND TROUBLED SLUMBER FROM WHICH SHE WILL NOT SOON AWAKEN.


BUT BRANDY CLARK IS HUMAN AND ROM WILL KEEP HER SAFE FROM HARM.

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. . . AND IT'S THE BEAST'S DUTY TO MAKE SURE SHE DOESN'T DIE ON OPENING NIGHT!

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